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ABSTRACT

This monograph documents four families' reactions to the experiences their children encounter at their urban middle school, showing how the families' interpretations are shaped by their perceptions of the roles played by the school, the parents, and the children, and how these perceptions are further mediated by their racial consciousness, class, and the gender of their children. The first section discusses study methodology, the social context of the school, and the varied approaches and strategies the school used to reach out to students and their families. The second section includes four case studies illustrating how these approaches and strategies were interpreted by students and their families. By comparing and contrasting the interpretations of the case studies, the final section discusses a range of factors that mediated their interpretations and the tensions and dilemmas the school faced in its efforts to reach out to families from diverse backgrounds. (Contains 29 references.) (SM)

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Reaching Out to Other People's Children in an Urban Middle School

The Families' Views

Jianzhong Xu

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The Series on Cultural Interchange

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Titles in the Series on Cultural Interchange

David Bensman

Building School-Family Partnerships in a South Bronx Classroom

This study of a fifth grade classroom presents three children and their families and the relationships they developed with the teacher, the ethnographer, and the school community, ranging from intense and collaborative to distant and fearful. The study explores the process of cultural interchange between the school and the families.

Kathe Jervis

Between Home and School: Cultural Interchange in an Elementary Classroom

This study of a second/third grade classroom in a parent-founded school follows a child from a religious family who travels a long distance, both geographically and psychologically, from home to school. The study tries to understand the distances some children must travel between home and the classroom and the influences they encounter along the way.

Kemly A. McGregor

Cultural Interchange in a Bronx High School: Three Children

This is a study of a small high school's attempt to create an intellectual culture that draws on and validates the realities of its students. While the school has been successful in reaching those children whose assumptions and values mirror its own, it still struggles to find a point of connection with those children who do not share those values.

Jianzhong Xu

Reaching Out to Other People's Children in an Urban Middle School: The Families' Views

This study documents four families' reactions to the experiences their children encounter at school, showing how the families' interpretations are shaped by their perceptions of the roles played by the school, the parents, and the children, and how these perceptions are further mediated by their racial consciousness, class, and the gender of their children.

The National Center for Restructuring Education, Schools, and Teaching (NCREST) was created to document, support, connect, and make lasting the many restructuring efforts going on throughout the nation. NCREST's work builds concrete, detailed knowledge about the intense and difficult efforts undertaken in restructuring schools. This knowledge is used to help others in their attempts at change, to begin to build future education programs for school practitioners, and to promote the policy changes that will nurture and encourage needed structural reforms. The Center brings together many voices: those of practitioners and researchers, parents and students, policy makers and teacher educators.

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Reaching Out to Other People's Children in an Urban Middle School

The Families' Views

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Preface to the Series on Cultural Interchange

In 1996, our NCREST-based team, dismayed by the inadequate educational progress of too many children in our country's public schools, began the research project reported in this monograph series. Various theories purported to shed light on the American dilemma of how to educate children outside the mainstream; some of the theories we agreed with, others we didn't. One explanation, which intrigued us because it raised issues for which we had no answers, was that cultural barriers between home and school stood in the way of educational progress, especially for poor children and children of color (Comer, 1993; Delpit, 1995; Fine, 1993; Ladson-Billings, 1994; National Coalition of Advocates for Students, 1994; Poplin & Weeres, 1993; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). Herbert Kohl in his book, *I Won't Learn From You!: The Role of Assent in Learning* (1991), put the matter most starkly when he said that some African-American and Latino children refused to learn in school because they believed that participating in the educational process meant accepting a cultural system that categorized them as inferior.

While there was something in this literature that rang true, we weren't sure how to connect it with our experience in public schools that were engaging poor and minority students in innovative learning communities (Bensman, 1994; Jervis, 1996; Snyder et al., 1992). In these schools, researchers saw evidence that most children acquired the skills and knowledge they needed to succeed in higher education, the world of work, and within their communities; they did not seem to choose between school and family. What made it possible for children in these schools to cross cultural boundaries? This question piqued our curiosity.

So we began our study.[1] Our four-person research team conceptualized the classroom as the most appropriate place to observe what we called "cultural interchange." We began by defining cultural interchange as the process by which members of groups with different traditions, values, beliefs, and experiences gained a greater degree of mutual understanding. We were looking for examples where teachers, students, and families drew lessons from each other and used those lessons to improve and enrich the ways they approached the world. We had our eyes open for instances

[1]This work is supported by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement Field-initiated grant #R306F60079. The perspectives represented here are our responsibility, not the granting agency.

where study participants were willing to accept some measures of disequilibrium, to shift or expand their worldview a little, to occasionally have their assumptions upset, and to tolerate the uncertainty that accompanies encounters with strangers.

We did not mean culture to be a code word for race. In thinking about culture, elements of behavior and mind-set produced by ethnic identification most readily spring to mind, but we assumed ethnic identification was only one of many aspects of culture. Ideas of what is valuable, what is beautiful, or what is successful are defined not only by ethnicity but by other factors such as social class, age, religion, race, and geographic locale. Culture, as it plays out in classrooms and schools, is complex and multifaceted, and we expected the interchange of culture between teachers and students, teachers and parents, and students among themselves to draw on all of these elements—although not always, and not always at the same time.

We began by looking at interchange in classrooms and school communities—with all the power differentials that implies—to capture and render a concept whereby teachers, students, and families learned from each other and integrated elements of each other's mind-frames into their own views of the world. We each pursued the idea of cultural interchange in our own way, and each of our studies took a divergent route. We ultimately drew differing conclusions about the usefulness of cultural interchange as a concept.

Each researcher worked in a different school. Although we predicated our research design on each setting's uniqueness and only loosely coupled our work to each other, we recognized that learning to overcome our own biases and take off our own blinders was essential. Capitalizing on our various backgrounds (academic researchers and former teachers, men and women, American and foreign-born, Asian, European, and African-American), we planned strategies to make ourselves more open to the cultural repertoire of students, families, and school personnel. While we individually analyzed our own data and wrote our own drafts, we collectively developed questions and concepts from which we could all draw. We visited each others' schools, watched videotapes of team members' study sites, and jointly interviewed personnel from each of the sites. Over time, we grew increasingly impressed by how differently we perceived and understood student behavior and classroom practice.

We chose schools to encompass a spectrum of student ages and, we hoped, educational practices. Access to the schools was a crucial determinant for our selection. Our presence as ethnographers was bound to be intrusive, so we selected only schools where we were known by someone on the staff. Using various ethnographic methods, each of us spent the academic year with teachers who were ready to open themselves up to the scrutiny required by this research. After spending some time at our site, we asked several students and their parents to participate in our study. We paid teachers and families for cooperating. Soon we were accompanying students to after-school activities and into their homes, churches, and communities.

Our observations focused on occasions when students brought their cultural perspectives into the collective discourse, or teachers represented their own

worldviews or the knowledge of institutional culture, their "sense of school," to students or families. Throughout, we observed the texture of human relations. The "we" here means the research team, but each of us perceived the world differently. We variously asked: Whose values were accorded respect? Whose values went unrecognized or were unconsciously ignored? Which students and families were included and participated? Which students and families were excluded or denied full participation? We attempted to understand underlying factors that shaped what we perceived as matches and mismatches among teachers, students, and their families. For this NCREST series on Cultural Interchange, we have produced four strikingly different case studies, each in a singular voice, each of which stands alone.

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Introduction

Over the past twenty years, researchers from various perspectives have documented the failure of the public school to pervasively reach those students from less socially advantaged strata, including children of color, recent immigrants, the poor, girls, and second-language learners. A wide range of strategies has been proposed to facilitate learning within each of these groups (Comer, 1988, 1993; Garcia, 1991; Kohl, 1991; Orenstein, 1994; Rose, 1989; Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines, 1988).

Led by Ladson-Billings' (1994, 1995) study of seven successful teachers of African-American students, the concept of and need for culturally relevant pedagogy are increasingly gaining importance. This rapidly developing field motivated Osborne (1996) to conduct a review of the literature on culturally relevant pedagogy for students who had been marginalized and normalized. Based on Ladson-Billings' proposition that students must experience success and develop cultural competence and critical consciousness, Osborne organized a body of ethnographies on teaching in cross-cultural and multiethnic settings over the past 30 years. He formulated nine assertions and discussed each in detail, followed by studies that both confirm and disconfirm the assertions. These assertions center on both fundamental understandings (e.g., socio-historico-political realities beyond the school, students' previous experiences, first languages, and their natal cultural identity) and classroom processes (e.g., instructional approaches, cultural assumptions in the classroom, and classroom management).

Although an increasing amount of attention has been devoted to how to improve the teaching of students from diverse cultural backgrounds, relatively little research has been done on how to reach out and involve their families, even though there is a consensus in the research community that family involvement is desirable and beneficial. For example, in his review of the literature, Osborne (1996) included one assertion on the desirability of involving the parents and families of children from marginalized groups. He found that "those who have investigated the issue have comprehensively supported it." However, "the issue of parental involvement has not been investigated widely by interpretive ethnographers" (1996, p. 294).

Similarly, in his review *Family, Community, and School Collaboration*, Arvizu (1996) found indisputable evidence that "when parents are involved, children do better in school, and they go to better schools" (p. 814). Likewise, based on a review of studies done over a quarter century, Hidalgo, Siu, Bright, Swap, and Epstein (1995) draw the same conclusion that children benefit from parent involvement. For them, the question becomes: If family involvement is important, how can schools help more families become involved in ways that help their children succeed in school?

Hidalgo et al. (1995) noted that researchers were beginning to examine what schools and families do together to support and enhance student learning. They identified an area that needs further investigation as "the nature of school, family, and community partnerships for families and children with diverse cultural backgrounds" (p. 499). This area deserves our attention because there is a mismatch between the diversity of American families and the structure of the schools (Lindner, 1987) and because "different types of schools, families, and communities require different strategies for involving parents. Cross-cultural strategies for achieving parent participation have not explicitly been explored in the research literature" (Arvizu, 1996, p. 814).

This area also deserves closer attention because of ongoing dynamic demographic changes in our society. In a special section on parent involvement in *Phi Delta Kappan*, Gough (1991) observed that "an increasing proportion of parents do not share the same cultural background as the teachers who deal daily with their youngster" (p. 1). This trend continues as the number of students and their families from diverse cultural backgrounds increases and the number of teachers from these groups decreases (Delpit, 1995; Kailin, 1994; Hidalgo, Siu, Bright, Swap & Epstein, 1995; Zeichner, 1993). Since we must increasingly depend on teachers who do not come from the same ethnic minority group as their students, we also increasingly depend on these teachers to reach out to families from varying backgrounds.

To meet this challenge, educators point to the importance of understanding these families. Based on their study of working with culturally diverse students and families in rural settings, Navarrete and White (1994) noted, "Given the nation's rapidly increasing number of culturally and linguistically diverse families, *understanding* and learning to work with families who represent varying world views and communication styles should be a priority for school personnel" (p. 55).

Likewise, in her influential book *Other People's Children*, Delpit (1995) argued that the answers to better educate poor children and children of color "lie not in a proliferation of new reform programs but in some basic understanding of who we are and how we are connected to and disconnected from one another" (p. xv). Yet, for too long, she observed:

> In the educational institutions of this country, the possibilities for poor people and for people of color to define themselves, to determine the self each should be, involve a power that lies outside of the self. It is others who determine how they should act, how they are to be judged (Delpit, 1995, p. xv).

This call for "some basic understanding" is particularly important for reaching out to families from diverse backgrounds. To better educate "other people's children," we must understand what is in *other people's minds*: How do they view themselves? How do they view the world around them? What is important for them? What do they want for their children?

Influenced by the existing literature discussed above, the purpose of this article is to better understand the issue of reaching out to students and their families from diverse cultural backgrounds. I examine the approaches one urban middle school used, focusing on families' interpretations of and reactions to these approaches. Furthermore, I discuss how their interpretations and reactions were shaped by their values, assumptions, priorities, and life circumstances.

This monograph is divided into three sections. The first section provides a brief discussion of methodology, the social context of the school, and the varied approaches and strategies the school used to reach out to students and their families. The second section includes four case studies illustrating how these approaches and strategies were interpreted by students and particularly by their families. By comparing and contrasting the interpretations of these case studies, the final section discusses a range of factors that mediated their interpretations as well as the tensions and dilemmas the school faced in its efforts to reach out to families from diverse backgrounds.

The School

During the 1996-97 school year, I spent an average of 10 to 12 days a month in a middle school community in New York City.[1] The data collected in this study came from various sources: (1) formal and informal interviews with all staff members in the school, with families, and with students; (2) observations of classroom interaction, staff meetings, parent association meetings, and parent/child/teacher conferences; (3) travel with students on a schoolwide three-day camping trip, on field and museum trips, and to basketball games; (4) visits to students' homes to meet their families and to parents' workplaces; and (5) collection of instructional materials, student work, and the school director's weekly memos.

In midyear, four students and their families were selected for an in-depth study. This is a purposeful sample (Fraenkel and Wallen, 1996) designed to reflect the students' and their families' diverse backgrounds. The selection process took into account the following dimensions: students' ethnicity, gender, grade, social visibility, and academic growth; the number of parents present in a household; the family's social and economic status. While most of the data on students were collected in school settings, most of the data on families were collected in their homes. I paid special attention to these parents in school settings (e.g., observing them in parent/child/teacher conferences and in parent association meetings). I visited their homes or workplaces an average of three times, from early February, 1997, to late August, 1997.

During the course of my fieldwork in the school community, I quickly developed trust with the school staff, students, and families, benefiting from the following factors: (1) the assistance of a colleague who had known the school director for many years; (2) my minority, but still relatively neutral, cultural identity (Chinese); (3) my perceived status as a young researcher who was sincerely interested in their world views; and (4) my previous experience working with families from diverse cultural backgrounds in the same geographic area (Xu, 1994; Xu and Corno, 1998).

[1] The names of school, staff, students, and families have been changed to protect their identities.

The data collected from the school and from the students and parents of the four families consisted of more than 1,500 pages of interview transcripts, 500 pages of field notes, 20 hours of videotapes, and many pages of student work and other school documents.

The data reduction for this monograph was guided by the existing literature (discussed above) with the aid of SQR NUD*IST, a software program for analyzing qualitative data. It was also influenced by Banks' (1993 and 1995) comprehensive reviews on multicultural education. Banks noted the danger embedded in this line of research pursued by cultural difference theorists who emphasize ethnic culture and devote little attention to other variables. He reminded us that "research related to effective teaching strategies for low-income students and students of color needs to examine the complex interactions of race, class, and gender" (1993, p. 36). Thus, when I wrote each case study, special attention was given to exploring these complex interactions. Although the emphasis of this article is on the families' interpretation of their school's efforts to reach out—and not on effective teaching strategies—I feel that Banks' recommendation is equally relevant here. Perhaps, by exploring these interactions, we will understand better what effective teaching strategies mean to low-income students and students of color, and not just from the perspective of researchers and teachers. For example, in her study on culturally relevant pedagogy, Ladson-Billings (1994 and 1995) used parent nomination of their children's teachers as a way to identify culturally relevant teachers. Once these teachers were identified, however, the mission of these parents was accomplished. Little data was drawn from parents' or students' perspectives. Instead, Ladson-Billings' findings were based largely on her understanding of what each teacher said and did, leaving us little basis to judge how specific teaching strategies were perceived by students and their families.

Each case is presented separately to retain the holistic nature of the school/family interactions and perceptions in each family. The four cases then serve as a basis for cross-case discussion. Interpretation based on data from multiple cases is more compelling than from a single case study (Merriam, 1988; Yin, 1984).

The constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) was used to analyze the data from the four case reports. Triangulation of different data sources and different perspectives was used as a means of enhancing internal validity and safeguarding against researcher bias (Denzin, 1978; Patton, 1980; Yin, 1984).

I studied a middle school that represents a "new breed" of schools that has tried to create a more personalized environment to reduce the distance between school and home and to better serve the needs of early adolescents and their families from diverse backgrounds living in an urban environment. In 1990, the present director and two teachers founded the school on the fifth floor of a century-old building without an elevator. Since then, it has maintained its small enrollment, which numbers about 140 students in grades six through eight. During the 1996–97

school year, 74% of the student body received free lunch, and an additional 7% received reduced-price lunch. Fifty-eight percent of the students lived in a household with both parents.

According to the New York City Public Schools Official Class Ethnic Census Report, the student body during 1996-97 was 47% Latino, 34% African American, 10% Caucasian, 5% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 1% American Indian or Alaskan. The remaining 3% was grouped under "CODE NOT ENTERED."[2]

Despite the school's ongoing effort to recruit teachers of color, the staff was less diverse than the student body. Only one of the nine full-time teachers was non-Caucasian.

The school stressed three interrelated approaches to create "a home away from home" for these early adolescents and their families from diverse backgrounds: building a school community; attending to students' personal and social needs; and emphasizing learning by experience. All of these approaches highlighted the school's willingness to formulate its curriculum and practice based on the experiences and circumstances of the students and their families.

Building a School Community

To build a home away from home, the school strove to build a strong feeling of school community. The director stressed its importance for her students in this way:

> Kids need to feel safe to learn. They need to feel safe to take chances when they learn, to try new things, to ask questions, to say that they're wrong or that they need help. Communities that functioned in kids' lives or people's lives in the past are weaker now. Neighborhoods do not have the strength that they used to have, nor do churches. Families, extended families, are not as strong. We have more "only" children than we used to have. So the school for many kids *is* their community. As a country, if we're going to be a democracy, kids have to learn to live in communities; and so the

[2]In reality, the student body was more diverse than indicated in the official census data. In a survey on homework, which I distributed to the students, their self-identification presented a different picture. The self-identification of Latino, Caucasian, Asian/Pacific, and American Indian/Alaskan was comparable to the official ethnic census report, with no more than a 3% difference. However, a striking 21% of the students identified themselves as "mixed." Another difference was that only 24% of the students identified themselves as African American, 10% less than shown in the official data.

> school must function that way if there aren't other functioning communities in their lives.

The emphasis on building a school community was embedded in the activities throughout the year: from stressing the importance of teamwork in athletic games during the fall orientation; to advisory classes, held twice a week, nurturing a sense of belonging among students; to practicing multiage grouping in all subject areas (except math) and maximizing social interactions among students in all grades; to thirty-minute teacher/child/parent conferences, held twice a year, where all felt free to share home and school experience; to the annual three-day trip, where parent volunteers joined teachers and children to explore nature away from the congestion of city life; to the mid-December Festival of Lights, where students and their families came together to learn about and share their respective holiday traditions; to the end-of-year prom designed to make sure that all students could participate and enjoy the occasion. For example, during school orientation in early September, staff members took the students to a nearby park. The afternoon began with two structured group activities. One activity was to ask each advisory group to choose six students to participate in a team relay; another was to ask each advisory group to select three students to play basketball. Each group included at least one girl. Later, the staff organizer explained that these activities reflected the director's belief in the importance of group activities and getting all students involved. The staff member explained that whether students were strong or weak, large or small, however different, everyone needed to learn how to work together as a team.

Attending to Students' Personal and Social Needs

Also important in building a home away from home was the school's emphasis on attending to the children's personal and social needs. The director argued, "If you don't deal with the whole child at this age in particular, students are not able to learn." Also, "Learning to get along with each other is a part of the curriculum." Not only was this considered an important learning experience in and of itself, but it also was a doorway that made other types of learning at school possible.

To accomplish this goal, the school was organized into advisory groups, with each staff member (except the director and counselor[3]) mentoring a group of about twelve students. Care was taken in matching student to staff member. In general, the director wanted each advisory group to include students from varying backgrounds, such as ethnicity, ability, gender, and grade. Students, too, could have input in the assignment process. For example, at midyear, the director shifted one

[3]Both the director and the counselor worked with all the students.

eighth-grade Latino girl to a different advisory group because the girl felt that the advisor of that group shared more similar life experiences with her. Advisory classes, held twice a week, were a main forum where staff and students could voice concerns and share experiences. For example, one mother noted that, while her son generally did not want to reveal himself to others, in his advisory class, he was quite willing to discuss issues that he never mentioned at home to his parents.

The advisory groups also became one of the main vehicles to connect staff and families. At the first meeting with parents and staff held at the beginning of the school year, the director stressed the importance of the school and parents working together, and let the parents know that they could call her or their children's advisors "day and night" when something important arose. For example, during the first meeting with parents and guardians in an advisory group, one staff member gave them three telephone numbers to reach her: one for weekdays, another for weekends, and a third for long weekends. Seeing that many parents looked puzzled as to why she gave out all these numbers, she explained that it was the tradition of the school and she welcomed them or their children to call her or leave a message.

In addition to the advisory system, there were other built-in avenues for the school to attend to students' personal and social needs. One avenue was a weekly ninety-minute staff meeting, which often became a regular forum where the staff shared their experiences of working with various groups of students, including important issues and concerns that frequently emerged. Another avenue was a thirty-minute parent/teacher/child conference held twice a year. For example, during the conferences, it was *not* rare for a teacher to ask a student, in front of a parent, such questions as, "How do you feel here socially?"

During the spring of 1997, there were classes called "Boys Talk" and "Girls Talk," led by a male and a female staff member, respectively, to address a wide range of issues facing early adolescents in an urban environment, including drugs, sex, and domestic violence. Interestingly, the discussions in both advisory classes and "Boys Talk"[4] helped raise the voices of a group of students who rarely spoke in other classes.

The emphasis on attending to students' personal and social needs was also evident in that several times during the school year some students received awards for their social and personal growth, or personal maturity, just as other students received awards for academic and athletic achievement.

[4]As a male, I refrained from asking to observe "Girls Talk" for fear of making the group uncomfortable.

Emphasizing Learning by Experience

Another related approach to building a home away from home emphasized the importance of learning by experience by organizing various educational trips. Each fall a local agency sponsored a free schoolwide, three-day camping trip to upstate New York, which was open to all students, staff, and parent volunteers. The trip gave the children an opportunity to explore nature through such activities as boating, fishing, hiking, building a shelter, and tracking animals. However, one of the challenges in organizing the trip was to persuade Latino parents to allow their adolescent daughters to attend, which meant staying away from home overnight. A school aide from the Latino community, who worked as the school secretary, acted as an outreach person to the Latino parents. She explained to them the benefits of the trip as well as the precautions the school took to ensure their daughters' safety. Some of these parents were invited to go on the trip with their daughters and to stay in their daughters' cabins at night. Because of the school's persistent efforts, many eighth-grade Latino girls were finally allowed by their parents to participate.

Other experiential activities included collecting leaves in the school neighborhood for study in a science class, visiting art and immigrant history museums in a humanities class, and drawing sketches of a neighborhood building according to scale in a math class. Hands-on projects, like building a motor-powered car, were made a part of classroom activities.

The Families

The Perry Household

I first met Mrs. Perry on September 4, 1996, at the school, where she volunteered as a Spanish translator for the school's open night parent meeting. Her ease and ready smile impressed me. Because of that impression, later in the school year, I asked her if she would be willing to act as a translator on my visits to families who did not speak English. She went with me once. After the initial visit, however, the mother in that particular family told me that she did not feel she had anything else to tell me and did not want to be involved further in the study. I then asked Mrs. Perry if she and her daughter, Allison, would participate, since I wanted to include at least one Latino girl and her family in my case studies. She readily agreed.

Mrs. Perry and her husband immigrated to New York from Ecuador. She came to the United States soon after Allison was born:

> Basically I came here because my mother worked so hard to bring us here, to get our papers. It cost her a lot of money. When we got married, my mother was there and everything was ready for me to come here. So we made an agreement. I told my husband to let me at least visit [my mother in the United States]. Not to live, just to visit.

After arriving here, however, Mrs. Perry liked the United States because "my mother could take care of my daughter so I could go to school and I could work," instead of having to stay home to raise her daughter as she had in Ecuador. She also liked other opportunities and facilities this country provided: "You can be whatever you want to here if you set your mind and set your goals." When Mrs. Perry went back to Ecuador, she talked to her husband about coming to the United States and finally convinced him to move here.

Before coming to this country, Mr. Perry was a computer engineer. However, because of the language barrier, he could not find the kind of work he wanted and instead worked at menial jobs, which he was not accustomed. He worked in a restaurant, a travel agency, and a supermarket, and at the same time he was trying to learn English. Because of the nature of these jobs, the long hours and

evening work, I was never able to meet and talk with him during my home visits. Meanwhile, with the help of her mother, Mrs. Perry returned to college, majoring in speech pathology, while also working as a college counselor.

Mrs. Perry began looking for a middle school for her daughter while Allison was still in the third grade. A teacher at Allison's elementary school suggested that Mrs. Perry check out this particular school. Also, a teacher she knew at the middle school recommended that she send her daughter here. At first impression, she did not like that the school was located on the fifth floor, and it did not seem to have enough space. But she did like the way the school presented itself, the variety of classes that were offered, and the interview given Allison as a prospective student. In addition, she favored the small size of the school and its proximity to their home.

Allison was now 11 years old and in sixth grade. She shared a bedroom with her younger sister in their two-bedroom apartment, located only one block away from the school. Allison and her sister shared a bunk bed; also in the bedroom was a bookshelf and a table. Several rows of teddy bears were displayed on the bookshelf, and many small decorative knickknacks were arranged on the table. Between the bookshelf and bed sat a small television set.

Allison carried a smile and radiated energy wherever she went. School was fun for her, and it was easy to make friends. In fact, the only thing she did not like about the school was that she had to walk up and down those five flights of stairs several times every day.

Allison demonstrated initiative in her classes. In a humanities class, the teacher wrote a play called "The Trial of Christopher Columbus." Allison was eager to participate and let the teacher know this without any hesitation, even though she would be performing in front of her older seventh and eighth grade peers in the same class. She asked excitedly, "Who is Bystander One? I want to be Bystander Two!" In her writing class, which was designed to build the vocabulary of second-language learners, Allison frequently raised her hand to answer the teacher's questions, such as "What do the prefixes 'intro-' and 'extro-' mean?" She liked the class because "I learn new vocabulary and it makes me look sophisticated!" The teacher noted that "Allison is a pleasure to have in my class. Her smile and enthusiasm contributed to the class and to her group greatly." Another teacher wrote in her report card: "You are a strong leader in the class and have made an effort to do extra credit whenever possible."

Allison also demonstrated effort in the way she took citywide standardized tests. During one of the tests, she kept working on questions until the last minute. As if this was not enough, she wanted some reassurance from the teacher that she had done everything right, asking "Should I have written that long?" Her attitude and effort most likely reflected her mother's influence, who mentioned during a parent/child/teacher conference that her goal was to help her daughter get into the

best high school. Allison said that she wanted to go to Stuyvesant, a highly respected and challenging high school in Manhattan. She was not discouraged because only one student at the school had been accepted at Stuyvesant the previous year and noted particularly that "my mom wants me to go there."

Consciousness of Cultural Identity and Origins

Although "we are here [in the United States] and this is a different society, a different culture," Mrs. Perry said that she expected Allison to value and "keep our roots." Noticing that the children here are not as respectful as she would like to see, she kept reminding her daughter that there are certain rules children are expected to follow, especially those relating to elders. Mrs. Perry observed that girls as young as seven years old began wearing high heels and painting their nails, and she lamented that some girls start adulthood too early and that "they don't have any childhood." Thus, she kept emphasizing to her daughter that "there is a time for everything."

Mrs. Perry was also concerned that "in this country people give too much liberty to their children," and she felt this was one of the main reasons that "many children are lost in this country." In response, Mrs. Perry tried to provide a more structured environment in her home:

> We have a schedule. When they [Allison and her sister] come home [from school], they eat, they rest a little, and then they start doing homework. When they finish their homework, they can do whatever they want; but before, they cannot. . . . When they are sitting at the table doing their homework, I come around. I ask them if they need any help and how is the homework going, or I check what they are doing.

This emphasis on homework derived from Mrs. Perry's belief that:

> Homework is very important in their education. It's part of their education. If they do homework, they are not only refreshing [their memory of] what they've learned during the day in school, but also they are expanding on what they have learned; and they will keep that in their minds then for the rest of their lives. If they do not do homework, how are they going to learn? I think homework is an avenue for learning.

Even after her daughters had completed their homework, Mrs. Perry tried to structure their free time: "I really want them to be prepared for the future. When they don't have anything to do, I like for them to read or do something that's good." She

limited their playing Nintendo games to one hour a night to encourage, instead, constructive activities for their minds. She would put her own homework aside to sit with them and read, listen to music, and play the piano or guitar. She said she did this, although "I work and I go to college, and sometimes I don't even have any time for myself." Often she would buy the Tuesday edition of the *New York Times* and ask Allison to read and write a summary on one or more of the articles in the Science Section.

When Allison complained to her advisor that her mother expected too much from her, Mrs. Perry admitted to her high expectations, noting that Allison had done very well during the last school year:

> She had the highest grades, honors—except the last time she got one high pass. I was very upset with that, because I don't understand why she got that grade, even though it's a good one, right? But my mentality is, if she had done everything, how come she got a high pass?

Mrs. Perry felt that having high expectations for Allison was "the only way you can help the child become someone with a future."

Being a top student was not the only thing Mrs. Perry wanted for Allison. Also, "I want her to be a happy person. . . . I want her to do what is best for her." Thus, "I always try to give my best part to my daughters." In addition to monitoring her daughters' homework, she tried to give them constant support and love, knowing that a teenager undergoes many changes. Sometimes after she came home, she would kiss her daughters, hug them, jump rope with them, and play with them as if she were their age. Ultimately, for both Mr. and Mrs. Perry, "we're committed in this life to be committed to them."

Consciousness of their origins was not only evidenced in Mrs. Perry's involvement in her children's education, it was also seen in her reaction to parental involvement at the school level. She estimated that about one fourth of Latino parents had difficulty with English. She felt that "it's very annoying" that "the school doesn't provide translation for the parents association meetings." She believed that was one reason for the poor attendance of Latino parents at these meetings.

Aside from the difficulty of understanding, she noted another barrier that discouraged Latino parents from becoming actively involved in their children's education at school:

> Parents [in my country] do not have the freedom to go the school and ask, "What are you doing? What are you teaching my kids?" But here you can go to the school, you can go to the classroom and observe the teacher and see how she's doing, what she's teach-

> ing. . . . Latin American parents don't usually know their rights in this country because nobody tells them. In the school, nobody tells you, "These are your rights. This you can do, but this you cannot do." Nobody tells them.

She said she learned about these rights, about what a teacher can do and what a parent can do, only after she had taken several courses in childhood education in college.

Academics

Mrs. Perry felt that the school was very good academically, judging by how the teachers taught their subjects and the way they assigned homework to her daughter. "They [teachers] are very supportive and conscious of what they want to teach the kids, to prepare them for high school. They have very high expectations in terms of that."

In addition, she found that "the [school] director is very involved in the school. . . She's always trying to get the best for the kids and I've seen it!" Also, "She is always concerned and watching the teachers to see what they have to do." She also found that not only the school director, but the teachers as well, tried to give the children the support they needed.

On the other hand, she noted, "There are certain aspects in the school that really sometimes make me think twice." One reservation she had was about the school's afternoon schedule, which included the twice-weekly advisory classes, community service, swimming, karate, Boys Talk, and Girls Talk. During one of the home visits, she told me that these classes were not about "academic affairs." She repeatedly told Allison, "Yes, I know that you would like these activities. I know you like them because you're not doing anything. . . . I know it's fun and it's a pleasurable. But it's not worth."

Mrs. Perry also had reservations about the focus of the monthly parents association meetings, particularly stemming from one planning meeting she attended for the next school year:

> I think at least I would have liked to hear about children, about students, and about how they're doing. I'm not talking preferentially about my daughter. I would like to know how the kids are doing, if they are succeeding or not. What happened to eighth graders? What schools they are going to attend. So at least we can have a vision of what schools our kids can apply to. There was nothing about this. They didn't mention anything.

The Mother's Concern With Allison As a Teenage Girl

Mrs. Perry's concern about Allison's status as a teenage girl may have been largely due to her own experience as a teenager in Ecuador, where she was "raised in a very strict environment." She never went to parties alone, even when she was 18 years old. Mrs. Perry expressed her concern at her first parent/child/teacher conference in late November, 1996. When her daughter's advisor asked her if she had anything on her mind, Mrs. Perry, hesitantly and apologetically, raised the issue of the homework being assigned by the humanities teacher, who often gave students a list of television programs to watch at home.

> Advisor: Do you have any questions?
>
> Mrs. Perry: If I have a question? Oh, yes, in terms of programs. In terms of watching TV, how does she [the teacher] do those?
>
> Advisor: I don't know. Do you have a list?
>
> Allison: Fifties movies. Yes.
>
> Advisor: Does it make sense?
>
> Mrs. Perry: Some of it. Maybe I'm not open enough, but one of them is *Desk Set*. It has too much sex involved.
>
> Advisor: So you think it's inappropriate?
>
> Mrs. Perry: She is just eleven, it must be classified.
>
> Advisor: That's a good idea. The class is for sixth, seventh, and eighth grades.
>
> Mrs. Perry: They're [Allison and her sister] not allowed to watch all kinds of TV at home.
>
> Advisor: I'll tell her [the teacher] about it. This comes up occasionally.
>
> Mrs. Perry: I'm sorry, but that's my concern.
>
> Advisor: Ages, they tend to forget.
>
> Mrs. Perry: I mean, it's not right or wrong.

Later, when interviewed in a home visit, Mrs. Perry elaborated on how some of the homework assignments she mentioned were in conflict with what she and her husband wanted to reinforce at home:

> We're very careful in terms of TV. They [Allison and her younger sister] are not allowed to watch movies without our approval. When they watch TV, either my husband or I watch it with them, because in many TV programs children are exposed to violence, sad shows,

> activities, all kinds of that stuff. Some movies are more deeply into those kind of things than others. So, they are not allowed to watch movies that contain those kinds of things. . . . We don't allow them, especially, I think if kids are exposed to sexual activities. Well, kissing is OK in certain aspects, but there are certain programs where a man and woman are on the bed having sexual intercourse. She is not allowed to watch that. . . . I don't want her to be exposed to these kinds of things because kids get curious. They want to do what they see.

Although Allison disagreed with her mother's view that *Desk Set* involved too much sex, she seemed willing to go along with her parents' overall view of television control for her and her sister. As she wrote in one of her writing classes:

> I think that television should be controlled in a way, for example: I think that every movie and t.v. show should have a warning about what ages can and cannot see the type of movie or show, if it does not have a warning I think that there should be an age rate so that people could see what is appropriate for them. This is my opinion. If people do not see the appropriate things, they might learn what is not right and then they start doing it. This could come up to crime, murdering and many other bad things that people do.

In another home visit, after the school year had ended, when asked how she felt about the lists of television programs assigned by the teacher since then, Mrs. Perry said that she was happy that she had not found any other assigned movies that included too much sex.

Another issue for Mrs. Perry was Allison's safety in school:

> There are three schools in the building and there is just one person [who works as a security guard]. It's impossible for that person to do his job. . . . Sometimes I have gone there and nobody's downstairs and I just go upstairs [unchecked].

She worried about a stranger wandering upstairs into the school, going into the school, doing whatever harm he wanted.

Mrs. Perry's concern for her daughter's safety was also evidenced in the way she thought about high school choices: "I've heard about one school, Stuyvesant. I know that it's one of the best schools in science and math. But you know, I'm always concerned where a school is located, with the neighborhood of the school."

Freedom: Two Different Views

Unlike the two areas discussed previously, where Allison tended to go along with her mother's positions on selecting a future high school or parental television supervision, Allison and her mother differed in their views about the amount of freedom students should have at school.

Mrs. Perry wondered whether the school afforded too much freedom to its students:

> There have been times or occasions where I have gone to the school, and during school hours. I have seen kids in the main office, while the others are in the classrooms. So, I say, what's happening here? I understand and I like the freedom that the kids have here, but sometimes I think it's too much freedom.

Although she had never seen Allison walking through the hallway or standing in the main office when she had a class scheduled, Mrs. Perry felt that this issue was not just about the freedom the school offered to its students. It was also about how students learned to handle this freedom. She said, "I think this doesn't depend only on the school, but also on the students. . . if the students take this freedom as an opportunity to excuse themselves for not taking classes."

In addition, she felt that, if students started to misuse this freedom, then parents should be made aware of this and should become involved:

> Parents also have to work on this, because it's not only the school. We cannot just blame the school. . . . If the parent thinks that the kid is not learning, well, do something. Go to the school, investigate what's going on, and ask why the child is not attending class.

Allison, on the other hand, loved the freedom she had at school. She even wrote a poem about it after being there only two weeks:

> Interconnections is cool,
> Interconnections is neat,
> Interconnections can never
> be beat.
>
> Intelligence here,
> Intelligence there,
> Intelligence is
> shining everywhere.

Kids are smart,
and I like that.
Teachers are good,
and good in teaching too.
But one of the things
I like best is the
Freedom, Knowledge
and understanding
they give to kids.

The Lynch Household

My first contact with the Lynch family occurred in late November, 1996, at a parent/child/teacher conference. During the meeting, Mrs. Lynch voiced a concern about her son, Greg, and his preparation for the citywide standardized tests. She wanted to know how she, as a parent, could get involved in the process. "Should we go to a Barnes & Noble bookstore to buy books?" If so, "What books would you recommend?" In addition, she wanted teachers to give Greg extra work "because he can do that" and "he can accomplish more." She wanted to know how to request extra work: "Do I go to you or to individual teachers?"

These questions intrigued me, since Greg was in the sixth grade and had been in the school less than three months. I wanted to know what made Mrs. Lynch ask such questions at her first parent/child/teacher conference at the school. How important were these issues to her? For what reasons?

Mrs. Lynch is of Chinese descent. She came to this country from Hong Kong, as a child, with her parents. After finishing high school, she attended one and a half years of college, but stopped when her first child (a daughter) was born. Recently, she returned to college and took courses in graphic design; she also worked in the library at another college. Her husband, Mr. Lynch, is of African American and Native American descent. He is a law professor and practicing lawyer.

Greg was twelve years old. He has a younger brother and sister and one older sister. He also has an older stepsister and stepbrother who no longer live at home. The family lived in a three-bedroom apartment, where Greg shared a bedroom with his younger brother. The living room contained a television, a sofa, a chair, a fish tank, a bookshelf, six bicycles, and an assortment of small pieces of furniture. On the wall hung framed pictures of Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr., giving his "I Have a Dream" speech. There was no table in the bedroom Greg shared with his brother, most likely because the room was too small. Clothes were scattered around on both beds. There was a small television. Greg told me that he could only get Channels 3 and 31 in the television in his room

and wished he could watch HBO, like he could in the living room. The only poster in the room advertised Michael Jordan's movie *Space Jam*. In addition, there were videogames, comic books, and a basketball. The bicycle and basketball occupied important places in Greg's life, as was evidenced in a list he wrote for a humanities class where each student was asked to name something important that he or she remembered for each age of his or her life. Greg listed the following:

1. I don't remember;
2. I learn how to say my first word, "NO."
3. I busted my lip;
4. I got my first bike;
5. I learn how ride my bike;
6. when I got into basketball;
7. I got my first allowance (as it is);
8. I played for the gacchos;
9. I went to PS. 234;
10. I had a 94 on my reading test;
11. I made the basketball team;
12. I'm writing this in CF's humanity

Greg looked more Chinese than African American, both in skin color and overall appearance. He gave the impression that he was constantly exploring his surroundings, listening, looking, or on the move. The school director described him in an interview as "bright, kind, a leader, reliable, and interested in learning. He soaks up everything that goes on and is well-respected by the other kids." This image, to some extent, was reflected in a poem he wrote, which was printed in the school literary magazine. It was titled, "Who Am I?"

So cool,
So nice,
So handsome
So sweet
Sweeter then a piece of candy
He glides across the room.
He's the best at everything.
He's very strong
All the girls like him
He's. . .
He's. . .
He's mysterious.
He's me.

Greg's self-image seemed more than imaginary. For example, one girl noted that "as a friend, he's *really* nice," and she liked him.

Greg felt that it was pretty good to be a student at the school: "Things are really good over here, because I like some classes, and they [the teachers] give you a lot more freedom." He said that he especially liked math, gym, and chess. He liked math class because the things that the teacher gave him were those "I learned in fifth grade mostly, so it's really a review." He liked gym because "I'm on the [basketball] team. I've played basketball since I was eight, so I've gotten the hang of it."

Greg prepared himself for his classes. For example, in late October, a science class started with a list of questions for students to answer on the excretory system, including "What happens when the kidneys do not work?" and "Describe similarities and differences between the excretory and the digestive systems." While writing down these questions, Greg said to himself that he was "so glad" that he had just reviewed the excretory system the night before.

Greg was not only motivated in class activities, but he also helped others to move along. For instance, in a math class four months later, the teacher asked students to work in groups. While one member of a group worked on the three times table (starting from 3 x 1 = and progressing to 3 x 12 =), another member of the group recorded the time each student needed to complete the table. Then each group was asked to draw a bar graph showing the results. A student named Eric prepared to do the test first, but he stopped shortly, complaining that Rebecca's counting was too loud and it interfered with his work (e.g., "Man, I cannot concentrate!"). Eric threw his pencil on the table, then shoved Rebecca, who in turn shoved him back. Greg rewrote the questions on a sheet of paper for Eric to continue and helped record his time, using a lower voice. After that, he did the same for Rebecca, and then let them record the time he spent on completing the table. Such willingness to help his classmates was acknowledged by his advisor in his year-end report, which noted that "Greg has been a great help in class and [he is] a very cooperative student."

Citywide Standardized Tests and Extra Work

After the first parent/child/teacher conference, I interviewed Mrs. Lynch at the library where she worked. The location was her choice because she had to go to her college classes after work. During the interview, Mrs. Lynch said that the reason she had asked about the citywide standardized tests at the first parent/child/teacher conference, even though Greg was just beginning the sixth grade, was that "I believe in preparation early." As for the importance of the citywide standardized tests, she explained:

> It's obvious to me that [the results of the] citywide tests go to the New York City high schools, that's what they look at. I mean, let's be realistic now. If you are at Stuyvesant or Bronx Science or any of the other specialized high schools, they'll look at these scores to see how well you did, whether you're an A student or a B student or a C student.

Even at this stage, Mrs. Lynch had already made up her mind about whether Greg met her expectations and what she would say to her friends about the school. Both would be judged by "his performance on the citywide tests. It depends on how well he does on the citywide tests, whether he has lagged back, or whether he has progressed." She went even further, saying that she would take Greg out of the school at the end of the school year if his standardized test scores on reading and math dropped.

The above comments are in line with the initial reasons Mrs. Lynch gave for enrolling Greg in this school. When Greg was in the third grade, she transferred him to an elementary school, which was "rated one of the tops when it comes to their reading and math." At graduation, the principal of that elementary school recommended this school [Interconnections]. "So, that opened up my eyes," she said, although she could not find any statistics on the school's standardized reading and math test scores in the application book prepared by the New York City Board of Education. Finally, she made the decision to send Greg to Interconnections after the school director gave her various school statistics orally and described how some graduates had gone on to Stuyvesant High School and LaGuardia High School for the Performing Arts.

Regarding the request she had made for extra work at the first parent/child/teacher conference, Mrs. Lynch felt that Greg got "too little work" from the school. "I've always believed that you can never get too much homework." This belief, she explained, had to do with her childhood experience as well as her recent return to college, where she again appreciated the value of homework to reinforce and expand what she learned in class. "If there are opportunities out there and you can push your grades up further, why not?"

As it turned out, Greg's mother did not receive any response from the school about her concern about the citywide standardized tests and her request for extra work for Greg. By the end of the school year, she had gotten no recommendations from the school on how she, as a parent, could help her son better prepare for the citywide tests, nor did Greg receive any extra work from his teachers. Most likely, this was due to the following reasons.

First, Greg resisted. In the middle of the first parent/child/teacher conference, Greg expressed displeasure with the idea of asking for more work, saying

"Extra homework? Oh, it's my first year." Four months later, in the middle of the second parent/child/teacher conference when the conference was interrupted by a staff member, Greg quietly prodded his mother, as if knowing what she was thinking:

> Greg: Don't ask him for extra work.
>
> Mrs. Lynch: Why?
>
> Greg: He said you had to go to every teacher.

At home, when Greg and his mother got into an argument about extra homework, he would say, "Mom, stop it! Don't ask for extra homework for me. I'm doing okay." When I asked him in early February whether his advisor or any teachers had given him extra homework, Greg said, "No," because "I didn't ask. . . . I didn't want no more homework."

Next, it seemed that the citywide testing was not something that the school viewed as a high priority. The advisor's opening statement in the first conference hinted, to some degree, at this:

> Portfolio is something kids start in the sixth grade. It has an entry sheet, a chance for kids to reflect on what they're learning. By the time they leave the school, it can show growth and demonstrate capabilities more effectively than any test scores.

As for extra work, the advisor responded that Greg could ask him to suggest some books to read as extra work for the humanities class. Greg could also contact other teachers for things that would count as extra credit. In general, the advisor viewed it as a situation where "Kids need to ask and show interest first." He felt that it was more important and more powerful for Greg to show interest, initiative, and ownership first to earn respect from teachers. The teacher's implicit message to Mrs. Lynch was that Greg was the one who needed to take the initiative, not his parents.

Finally, Mrs. Lynch's busy schedule prevented her from following up with Greg, his advisor, and his teachers. Her job at the college library was full-time, and she attended college courses four nights a week. Often she was not at home during the early evening hours, and when she did arrive home, she sometimes had to work on her own assignments until 3:00 a.m. After the first conference with Greg's advisor, she said she intended to contact him [the advisor] on a monthly basis for feedback. Also, she would have liked to have contacted Greg's teachers on a monthly basis so that she would have a better idea of what Greg was doing firsthand, rather than relying only on the advisor's "interpretation." She said, "If I can find other programs out there to improve his math or reading or whatever, I'd like to take advantage of them." However, her hectic schedule prevented her from implementing any of these plans.

Although Greg did not want to take the initiative to ask for extra work, he seemed to be very concerned with his test scores, most likely because of his mother's influence. One afternoon in early March, after instructing students on how to take the upcoming citywide PAL test (e.g., "Make a list of ideas and look for details"), the teacher asked them if they had any questions. Greg quickly raised several questions:

Greg: Are you grading it?

Teacher: Yes, teachers grade it.

Greg: On what grounds?

Teacher: On a scale from one to six. [Then returning to the class] In your introduction, tell people what you want to say. . . .

When the teacher shifted to another topic, Greg asked further what the scales stood for and if he would get a chance to see his test score. Greg was one of the few students who finished the test quickly, but he came back to the classroom after the others had left, telling the teachers, "I think I have done pretty good." He quickly left the room after the teacher nodded his head.

Community Cohesiveness and Academics

Mrs. Lynch observed that "We have a certain group of kids over there who are not getting what they should be getting at home. . . . [So] the school is trying to make up for it. . . [by] trying to be a mom and dad to these kids where they may not have an emotional mom and dad at home." She was pleased that the school tried to foster "a tight-knit community," that is, "be together, be there for each other." Overall, she was comfortable with the direction the school was taking. She also was impressed with the devotion and commitment of the school director and other staff members.

Greg's mother noted that "Greg loves the social life of the school." Greg agreed, giving a list of things that made him happy there. At the top of the list was that he felt his friends and teachers were nice. He liked various school trips and extracurricular activities, especially playing basketball. He enjoyed "a lot of freedom" at school and felt that "they [the staff] are not always on your case" and "they're not always pressuring you doing things. . . . I get to roam around and go out to eat" during lunchtime. During the twice-a-week advisory class, he and his peers felt free to "talk about things that happened in class and in school" as well as "problems in the world."

Mrs. Lynch contemplated the school's desire to build "a nice chummy community." She said, "It's fine to be a mom and dad. But there's a fine line where you

should not compromise your academics." She was concerned that, with the amount of emphasis stressing school community cohesiveness, academics might be "sidetracked" and "compromised":

> Out of all the conversations, I have yet to hear about academics, about how to strengthen academics. That wasn't discussed. . . Isn't that also a priority too? All they keep talking about is cohesiveness. . . . I think academics should be stressed also. That's why you send your kids there. Besides being chummy, chummy, and being in a feel good environment, you've got to have strong academics.

In Greg's case, she felt that the school didn't push him enough academically. She became even more concerned when his citywide standardized reading scores were received, ranking him at the 53rd percentile, compared with his ranking at the 63rd percentile the previous year. Admittedly, Greg's math ranking rose from the 87th percentile to the 91st percentile over the same period. Yet, she asked: "His math score went up, but what happened to his reading score? Were they lax on that? Did they fall back on that? Did they just push math and let everything else slide back?"

Mrs. Lynch felt that she was in "a catch 22" situation on the question of whether to let Greg stay at the school: "I can understand if both scores went down dramatically. Then he's out of there. Okay, then he's totally out. But since he has elevated his math score, I guess he stays there another year." The decision to let Greg stay another year was "also based on that he seems to be pleased with the school."

As it turned out, Mrs. Lynch not only allowed Greg to stay at the school, but she also arranged for Greg's younger sister apply there. She sent her daughter to the school the following year. Mrs. Lynch explained that it's like "a give and take balance." Yet, in addition to Greg's positive attitude toward the school, its closeness to their home, and her desire to have his sister go to the same school, Mrs. Lynch liked the school's "liberal" environment. There was not too much pressure, yet at the same time, they did not let a child fall back to a point where he or she could not catch up. She remembered, as a child, that the emphasis had always been on "you got to do this, you got to do that, if not, then you're a bad child."

Even so, academics remained Mrs. Lynch's major concern:

> I told everyone I would give the school one year to see the results. I want to have an open mind, to see how well she [her daughter] does in the school. If she's not doing well I'll have no hesitation in pulling her out.

Her concern was evidenced in the following question she posed to me at the end of the final home visit: "I have a question: 'Do the other parents express what

I express when it comes to academics, or are they fine with that? Are they fine with that?'" Then she offered me some unsolicited advice about how the issue of academics should be addressed in my study:

> Academics should be in the forefront, not in the background, because when you go on to the ninth grade, that's what they [the high schools] want. They want academics to be stressed. They don't want a chummy, chummy environment. Stuyvesant is not going to ask: "Are you going to get along well with the other students?" No, they're going to ask you, "What's your reading score? What's your math score?" That's all they're concerned about. So I hope you emphasize academics in your report. I hope you stress it a lot.

Racial Consciousness

It seemed that the Lynch family's emphasis on academics was shaped, to some extent, by their racial consciousness. Mr. and Mrs. Lynch were keenly aware of their own racial identities. For example, Mrs. Lynch's parents did not recognize her relationship with Mr. Lynch and were not part of their family life for more than a decade because she had married a non-Chinese. Mr. Lynch explained, "I've the feeling it could have been anybody as long as he wasn't Chinese. I think if it was a Chinese person he could have been horrible, but they would have loved him." Thus, for both Mr. and Mrs. Lynch, it was a long and difficult period. And even though Mrs. Lynch's parents had recently been introduced to their grandchildren, the uneasiness and strain remained. This can be seen from the following brief exchange where the word "difficult" was repeated four times:

> Mrs. Lynch: I was really upset. I mean now they come into my life again, but those times. . . .
>
> Mr. Lynch: It was difficult for both of us.
>
> Mrs. Lynch: It was very difficult.
>
> Researcher: Just because of the interracial marriage?
>
> Mrs. Lynch: Yes. It was very difficult.
>
> Mr. Lynch: It was difficult for both of us. I wanted to meet and know her family, and she wanted me to meet and know her family. . . .

Racial consciousness influenced what Mr. and Mrs. Lynch expected of their children. Mrs. Lynch noted, "For you to recognize one heritage, you must also recognize the other [parent's] heritage. And for you to deny one heritage, then you're denying the other one." Similarly, Mr. Lynch wanted his children to understand "who they are and why they exist," and that "they exist because we came together."

He explained:

> I demand the same kind of values that their mother and father were brought up on: Honesty, that's important. I demand that they think for themselves, that's more important. And I demand that they believe in our family, even if it's a difficult situation for us. We are an interracial family and both their mother and I are proud of where we come from. We're not subordinating ourselves to anyone. So we insist that they be aware of both sides of their family, and be proud of it. That's why we have this library. . . . we have over 1,500 books, from all different cultures, they have these books in their rooms because we insist on that, that's important for us.

The history of segregation and the experience of emigrating from another country shaped the way Mr. and Mrs. Lynch viewed education. Mr. Lynch noted:

> To us, there's no substitute for eventually going to college. We won't tolerate anything less than that. We're clear on that. Doing well in school, there's no substitute for that. There's no sense that you can do a little bit better is good enough. We're very consistent about that. It's never good enough, it really isn't. We always expect better and we know they can do better because we see it.
>
> There's no substitute for education, that's the only way minorities are going to make it in this country is to be educated, so we're both passionate about it. . . . We were both brought up that way.

Mr. and Mrs. Lynch's reactions to the school's curriculum were influenced by their own racial consciousness. The school participated in a program called "Cops and Kids," sponsored by a local community agency. It was designed to promote mutual understanding between the children and the police through dialogue and conflict resolution. Although Greg looked more Chinese than African American, Mr. Lynch adamantly opposed his participation in this program. He explained:

> I don't believe the propaganda of the police department. I have a different approach to the police than possibly my wife. But to me those programs are propaganda. They don't deal with the fact that the police treat African Americans differently. It's a legal fact, it's a historical fact, and that we have huge incidents of brutality and unexplained murders against minorities. . . . I don't want him to be a victim of that kind of propaganda. Black children cannot go up to the police and say, "Mr. Officer?" They just can't. That's a fact of life in this country. The police don't treat them the same [as Whites]. It's foolish for his own safety to be part of that propagan-

> da. He needs to be much more sharper about the police than this kind of propaganda. The police don't treat everybody the same. We see it everyday, newspapers are full of it. I didn't want him to go, I'm very adamant about that, and that's justified.

Mrs. Lynch viewed the issue differently. She said, "I have no problem with that [program]." As for her husband's response, she explained, "You have to understand that when he was growing up, there was segregation and the law enforcement wasn't too kind toward him. I think it's ingrained in him to a point where you can't trust a police officer."

As for his sense of racial identity, Greg thought that "I'm both [African American and Chinese American]. I look like an Asian, but sometimes I speak like an African American." Mrs. Lynch observed:

> Sometimes people do stare at him because of his skin complexion, and they couldn't tell whether he's Filipino or Polynesian. So sometimes it gets a little bit awkward. But like I said, he's a people person and he's overcome that. He has no problem with that.

As he grew up, Greg dreamed he would "make it into the NBA, so I can make millions." And "If I don't make it into the NBA, I'm going to be a doctor" because "I want to save lives." He sensed that "my dad wants me to be a lawyer." Mrs. Lynch also observed that, although her husband said that he wanted Greg to be happy, "I think deep down inside he wants him to be a lawyer. . . . like a dad-and-son firm." She also observed that her husband tried to make Greg see things logically, to analyze them as a lawyer. As for herself, she would be happy if Greg became a dentist or a good businessman.

The Lenard Household

Derrick Lenard was in seventh grade. He lived and slept in the living room of a two-bedroom apartment, where his mother, Ms. Lenard, and her fiancée, Mr. Brown, shared one bedroom; the half-brother of his mother's fiancée occupied the other bedroom. Derrick's biological parents and the others living in the apartment are all of African-American descent. Ms. Lenard worked as a clerk at a film distribution company, and Mr. Brown was employed as a limousine driver. Derrick was one of a few students in his school who spent more than one hour every day commuting to and from school.

When Derrick graduated from elementary school, Ms. Lenard wanted to send him to a small middle school. "I was looking at the fact that in a larger school children sort of get lost, and I didn't want that to happen to Derrick." She also wished "to put him in a situation where the ethnicity was very diverse," adding:

> I want Derrick to be tolerant of different races, different cultures, and different people, even different thinking within the same race. You can't get that by just telling him that, or by putting him in a school where ninety-five percent of the children look just like you.
>
> In addition:
>
> I wanted to put him in an environment where, regardless of the economic background, the forefront of everybody's mind was the children have to learn." I wanted him to be able to step out into the world and just embrace everything. And if something doesn't make sense, be there in a position to fix it.

As president of the elementary school PTA, Ms. Lenard had a chance to look at a dozen schools. She finally decided to send Derrick to this school, because "I didn't see the option [I desired] in any other of the schools I looked at." What also made the school appealing to her was its emphasis on "helping people get along."

Derrick was of average height for a boy his age. But his chubby and slow-moving body stood out as he walked through the narrow, crowded hallways of the school. He said that he wanted to become a corporate lawyer because "I like to argue." One teacher agreed that "he has a real strong sense of right and wrong, from his viewpoint, and he isn't willing to back down in an argument or compromise." Students and teachers thought that he was funny and friendly, although sometimes he got on their nerves because of his strong personality. He liked music and movies. During home visits, I counted thirteen CDs near his bed, including songs such as Michael Jackson's "They Don't Care about Us," Shabby Ranks' "As Raw as Ever," and Roy Campbell's "La Tierra del Fuego." Besides sleeping over at other students' apartments, Derrick also liked to go to movie theaters and videotape stores with his friends. In the living room, over his bed, hung three large movie posters advertising *The Crow*, *Mimic*, and *Copland*, which covered most of the space on the wall.

Derrick felt that school was "fun" because students had lockers, and they were allowed to go outside for lunch every day. In addition to gym class, where students often played basketball, he liked his science class. For example, during one science class when the teacher discussed the launching missions of the Mars Global Surveyor and the information it might send back to Earth in the next several months, Derrick was very attentive and quickly raised the question, "Why every time we talk about the planets, it's always Mars?" In another science class, he was intrigued how a person would feel differently in space, without gravity, and asked the teacher how to answer the question, "How does the cardiovascular system adapt to weightlessness in space?" After the teacher explained, he quickly went back to his seat to think and write about the assignment. He also enjoyed hands-on activities. For example, he and other students in his group concentrated on cutting wood

pieces to build a balloon-powered car. Near the end of one class period, after other students were asked to stop working in their cars, he was the only one who continued to work and didn't want to stop.

In most of the other classes I observed, however, Derrick tended to be distracted easily or he would withdraw from class activities. One teacher asked each student to design and measure a house model of their choice and then estimate the material and labor costs that would be required to built it in different climates. As the teacher explained why labor costs would be less expensive in some climates, the class became very quiet—except Derrick, who initiated a conversation and playful contact with a girl seated nearby. Later during the class, Derrick tore a page from a magazine and gave it to a boy, who then came over and handed him an audiotape. After class, when I asked him about the exchange, he told me that the audiotape contained a song he wanted called "Foxy Brown's Best vs. Lihkim."

In his humanities class three months later, after a discussion of the factors that molded the 1950s, the teacher asked students to work in pairs and prepare for a debate on the pro's and con's of coeducation. Derrick was assigned to work with another boy. While most of the pairs engaged in some kind of conversation on the topic, Derrick and his partner sat silently. As it turned out, he and his partner were the only ones that did not make any point during the debate, despite the teacher's prompt, "Do you have any point?" When I commented that Derrick and his partner were the only ones who did not add to the discussion, the teacher told me that she had already mentioned Derrick's apathy to his advisor.

Derrick said he did not like these classes because they were boring and hard and they required him to do too much work. Most likely related to this attitude, he sometimes seemed to take a carefree approach to attending school. When he failed to come to school twice during the middle of March, he gave what he considered two different legitimate reasons. First, he couldn't find anything to wear. The second time, he did not want to come to school because it was only a half day and not worth it.

The consensus among adults was that Derrick was easily angered. During a casual conversation with a student-teacher, as soon as the topic turned to Derrick, her first comment was that he tended to make other people angry. Ms. Lenard agreed. She felt that a combination of factors had contributed to his anger:

> He's got the fact that his father isn't around, the fact that he's overweight, and the fact that he always wants to dress in style with sneakers, and clothes, and other things I cannot afford. . . . [Also] he's got the need to be cool, and accepted in school by his friends.

When asked what made him get angry, Derrick said that his father's leaving was the main reason. "My father left and he vanished with all our money." Also, he felt

that some kids in this school were "snotty." He gave an example of one student who asked him for money when they went out for lunch, and he lent it to him. However, later when he needed money, the same student would not lend him any, which made him feel like he wanted to hit him. Derrick also felt that some girls received preferential treatment from some teachers: "Girls could do something [bad] and some teachers said nothing. But boys do the same exact thing the girls did, you're on probation."

School Community

Mr. Brown applauded the school's efforts in "actually getting to know and being intertwined with each individual student and parent." He felt "that's what helps to gain the trust" between the school and families:

> The clinical atmosphere of regular public schools is that you go in and there's a file and a name on a desk. How can you trust the system when you don't trust the individuals that are at the school? The difference at Interconnections is that you actually trust the teachers and the principal to work together with you in conjunction with the system to make it work for your child. That doesn't happen in regular public schools.

He also appreciated the amount of care, interest, effort, and energy that the staff exhibited, which made parents want to keep their children at the school.

Ms. Lenard liked the family atmosphere of school:

> It felt like I had gutted out my living room and put these kids in my house and said, "Okay, now we're going to educate these kids." That's what it felt like. And that felt good to me. . . . It's that nurturing thing, that homey feeling, that family feeling that just spilled over from hour to hour to hour.

After Derrick's father and mother divorced, Derrick was taken out of school and went to live with his father in another city for several months. When things did not work out, Ms. Lenard asked the school director if Derrick could return to the school. The director responded by saying, "Yes, Derrick is a part of the family; we'll make room for him." Another teacher made a similar comment: "Derrick is a part of the family. We'll make room. We'll squeeze him in." Ms. Lenard credited the school's effort to reach out and help the family to the school's "knowing our situation." She observed also that all of these efforts had helped Derrick "get to a point where he could sit down without being so angry. . . so he could learn."

Academics

Mr. Brown felt that the school as a nurturing community was "half of the package." He said, "We love the school for it and I know we've said it like 100 times on your tape. We think that's great. But the other half is just as important." Specifically, he added that "the basic skills aren't being paid enough attention to."

> I've read some of the stuff that Derrick has written. I made him go back and redo it three or four times. . . . So I hoped when he went back to school, the teacher would say, "Derrick, you have a problem here with punctuation, you have a problem here with spelling." But we heard nothing.

He was concerned that the teachers did not provide timely feedback on what Derrick needed to work on. When he helped Derrick do an assignment, he would like to see that assignment come back to the house "with a grade and with comments of what the teacher feels Derrick needs to do to improve." This type of feedback, he reasoned, would help "me follow his current curriculum so that I can help him with what they're helping him with and give him extra stuff on it." Otherwise, "all I can do is give him whatever I feel he needs."

It was not that teachers did not provide any feedback. Rather, it seemed that Derrick's parents and teachers had different views about what kind of feedback was considered important. This can be seen in Derrick's homework assignment:

> I'm writing about my mom because she's a nice, loving person who takes really good care of our family. Not only does she take care of our family but she takes care of my friends, her friends, my dads friends and sometimes neighbors. no matter where we live, She is also smart. She always did her homework. In fact she was so good in school her teacher invited her to a trip to europe. I forgot why she didn't go. Then she is serious when It's time to do stuff no matter what it is. And she starting a few years ago to, (no offeace to my mom but) cook good. And thats why I wrote about my mom. Oh! by the way as you can see by reading this you can tell my mom is a good mom.

The teacher wrote comments in two different places. In the right-hand margin, she wrote, "I don't think a compliment would offend her." Then she wrote on a yellow post-it note, sticking it on the top of the paper. It read:

> Derrick, it's great that you respect and appreciate your mom so much. What are the qualities about her that you see in yourself? What has she taught you that you love? How do you show her how much you care? Good work.

This example shows that the teacher focused on ideas embedded in Derrick's writing, which she used to assess the work. Also, her comments centered on personal connections she wanted Derrick to make in his life. On the other hand, she paid no attention to "the basic skills" that his parents were especially concerned about and wanted Derrick to improve, including punctuation, grammar, and spelling.

Mr. Brown and Ms. Lenard questioned the school's practice of waiting until parent/child/teacher conferences to inform parents about their child's academic progress. Related to one teacher's comment that "Derrick, this paper you wrote two months ago really wasn't up to par," Mr. Brown felt that "if that's the case, why didn't you deal with that particular paper at the time of writing and make him redo it?" Ms. Lenard also was dismayed with the delayed response, adding "That's enough time to lose a kid. That's enough time for a kid to get in trouble academically." Mr. Brown added:

> They [the teachers] just take this overall picture of who the kid is and if the parents are involved. . . . It's just this vagueness opposed to dealing with the specific tools these kids need to have to actually go forward.

He speculated that because the school "spent so much time and energy" getting to know the children personally, there was little time and energy left to use this knowledge "as a leverage to get the kids to learn more."

The Role of Parent and Child and the School Structure

Just as teachers and parents held different views about what kinds of feedback were more important for Derrick, they also held different views about the role parents should play in the child's education. This was evident in the first parent/child/teacher conference on November 22, 1996, where the school director, Derrick's advisor, Derrick, and Ms. Lenard were all present. The director came to the conference because Derrick had not been doing well since September. Derrick was frequently distracted in class, often forgot his homework, and had failed math. During the conference, which lasted almost an hour, the director asked Ms. Lenard three times to "back off" and let Derrick take charge of his own learning:

> Advisor: Let's see this report. What do you see you can improve? What do you think is missing from this report?
>
> Derrick: It's too short.
>
> Ms. Lenard: That's all?
>
> Director: [To Mrs. Lenard] Let him answer. [To Derrick] I think the thing is, what do you want to do? When people put pressure on you, you do all [your work] for a while. . . . You have to learn yourself to be a learner.

Ms. Lenard: I'll make a list.

Director: [To Mrs. Lenard] Not you, let him make it. . . .

Ms. Lenard: I need to put this in a contract.

Director: [To Mrs. Lenard] It's not your contract.

One of the main decisions the director made "on the spot" was requesting that Derrick write a contract about what he needed and wanted to do in school, and she wanted him to take full responsibility for writing it up, without any assistance from his mother.

Nine months later, Derrick still had not written up his contract. During the remainder of the school year, the director said that she had talked with Derrick about it on several occasions. However, neither she nor Derrick's advisor followed up with Ms. Lenard about the contract. When asked about her reaction to Derrick's unwritten contract, Mrs. Lenard expressed reservations about the school's view of the parent's role:

> As a parent, I have my responsibility. I want to make sure we're all talking about the same thing. . . . Yes, you're right, his education is his responsibility. But it's our responsibility to track him. . . . It's up to us to say, "Well, Derrick, we know you don't care and we know you don't like this, but you need to do this and this and this." And I can't do that if I'm not charting down what's being talked about [during the conference].

She felt that her job as a parent was to "act as a liaison" between Derrick and school so the school "doesn't have a hard time teaching him and he doesn't have a hard time learning."

Imbedded in the contract incident was the school's general view about the type of structure students need. The school was influenced by progressive education and valued the importance of entrusting children to take initiative and responsibility for their own learning. Ms. Lenard perceived this approach on the part of teachers as being "too laid back." She felt that Derrick needed "a more strict environment." She believed that he was one of those children who required consistent monitoring to keep him on track. Otherwise, Derrick would find every possible excuse for not doing his school work. Even with a project he really liked, he needed more structure to help him budget time and follow through to completion. While at camp one summer, he spent one full hour and fifty minutes thinking about different ways design an ashtray for Mr. Brown; in the end, he had only ten minutes to actually make one.

On other matters, it seemed that the school did try to keep an eye on Derrick from time to time. During a weekly staff meeting ten days after the parent/child/

teacher conference, the director asked the staff to make a list of students who had difficulties in subject areas. Derrick was one of about two dozen students whose names were mentioned. Although he was not considered as one of the "priority students" and was not a focus of the discussion that followed, his advisor reminded the staff, "If anybody knows Derrick doesn't do homework, let me know. I want to make sure he does it." Three months later, before the first period, the advisor asked Derrick to check with the teachers of the three classes he had missed the previous day so he could make up his assignments. Near the end of another class, a teacher requested that Derrick come back after school for help with his homework.

Racial Consciousness: A Racial Incident or Not?

Before the first parent/child/teacher conference, an incident occurred between Derrick and Davis, a seventh-grade Latino boy. I was not present when the incident occurred; however, multiple interviews with the two boys, their teachers, and their parents indicated that they had been calling each other names for more than two days. Derrick called Davis "motherfucker," and Davis called Derrick "nigger." It was unclear who started the name-calling first, but the ill feelings finally escalated into a fight in class on a Friday morning. Derrick stood up and hit Davis's face, and Davis responded by hitting Derrick back. The teacher took both of them to the director's office. For fighting, the director immediately suspended them from school on the following Monday. Then she called the parents of both boys and asked them to come to school to discuss the incident.

Later, Ms. Lenard explained to me how she interpreted the incident, with special attention on the term "nigger":

> When a Black kid's talking to a Black kid, it's a term of affection. But, have a Spanish kid or an Asian or European child say that to a Black kid, and they're ready to fight. It incites rage in them. Okay, these children know this.

It seemed that Davis did understand the affectionate side of this term: "When me and my friends talk, we say like, 'What's up, nigger?'" But he also understood the highly insulting connotation in a different situation, adding "Sometimes, I stopped [from using the term] because a lot will happen." In the context of this incident, both Davis and Derrick understood that Davis had not used the term to show affection. Derrick said that the reason Davis called him this, despite his repeated requests not to, was "to get me upset." What was less certain was Davis's understanding of how much emotional intensity the term could incite in an African American youth.

Although Ms. Lenard was sure that Davis used the term to agitate Derrick, Derrick's advisor and the director downplayed its emotional intensity. In a brief

conversation with Ms. Lenard several days later at school, the advisor expressed the view that, while adolescents sometimes use the term in a derogatory way, in this case he thought Davis had simply used it to annoy his classmate. As she looked back at the incident five months later, the director agreed with this interpretation:

> My feeling is that Davis saw that it bothered Derrick, but he didn't understand all of the emotional things about the word "nigger." Davis flared up and used whatever weapons he thought would hurt Derrick.

She felt Ms. Lenard's perception was understandable:

> Most adults have had racial incidents. Particularly African Americans have had discrimination and have been involved in racial incidents. So when you have two kids of different ethnic backgrounds and one calls your child "nigger," then understandably she thought it was a racial thing. If Davis had continued to use the word or had continued to have problems with Derrick, then I would have thought it was racial.

Davis's father also thought that the incident was not racial, saying "I never give racism to my son." Yet he did want Davis to draw lessons from this incident and, in the future, be more careful how he talks.

Ms. Lenard's concern was more than racial. She wondered why the school let this name-calling continue for more than two days without any intervention, until it burst into a fist fight:

> Derrick said he had spoken to his advisor and he had spoken to the director. Because there have been other things that happened with Derrick, they sort of just brushed it off as Derrick just being overly angry about something else when that wasn't the case.

Ms. Lenard feared that the incident would add to Derrick's anger to such a degree that he got angry with everybody, and then "when that's what your mindset is, how can you open yourself up to learn?"

As for the importance of racial acceptance beyond this incident, Ms. Lenard felt that "with all that's going on in the world and all that's going on in our communities, this takes just as much precedence as getting algebra right." She noted that "The racial tension in our neighborhood is ridiculous." Also:

> My son, an African American child, cannot walk ten feet in front of me without a cop approaching him, asking "What are you doing on the street? It's after eight o'clock, where are you going? Are you by yourself?"

In addition, Ms. Lenard observed that police officers conducted random drug searches in a videogame store where Derrick often went with his friends, frequently pushing African American youths against the wall and demanding to know their identities.

Thus, Ms. Lenard thought it was important for the school to make time for a dialogue on race among staff, students, and parents:

> You've got to have a dialogue, even though there's going to be yelling, "I don't understand!" And you may walk away from the table more confused than when you got there. But you've got to keep it going until it makes sense to you.

On the other hand, Ms. Lenard understood that there was fear in a school about opening up such a dialogue, because in this society we do not get along well as adults, and often "we don't talk as grown-ups." "It's like telling a kid not to smoke while you smoke." Mr. Brown felt the racial makeup of the staff and student body in the school might make such a dialogue even more difficult to start:

> [Imagine] I'm a [Black] principal of a generally White school and I go to the teachers, the board, and the parents and say, "Listen, I want to teach your kids about how not to be racially antagonistic toward each other." Can you imagine the responses? Can you imagine the wall you're going to run into? "Wait a minute! This Black man wants to come in and teach my kids about how to not be antagonistic toward other races?" Now reverse that situation, so you've got primarily a White principal and White teachers, all of a sudden now saying to Black parents who have their kids at this school: "We're going to open this whole can of worms on racism with your twelve year old." Just the thought of that alone, I'm sure, stopped them from really doing anything about it except in individual cases, because that's the fear. I don't expect as a result of this [incident] or anything else that we'll actually deal with that issue.

It seemed that the fight with Davis lingered in Derrick's mind, because he wrote about it two and a half months later in one of his writing classes:

> A fight that I had was when Davis called me a nigger. So I said, "Call me a nigger again, I'm going to slap you." So he said, "Yeh, yeh, I dare you, nigger." So I got up and slapped. So he slap me back. Then I pushed him and pushed him again, then he fell, then he go tap and then I pushed him into Mrs. Howard's closet door.

Derrick felt positive about the school's approach in dealing with the incident:

> I don't think they could do nothing because in the [school's] code of conduct it says they don't want nobody cursing and he cursed anyway. And in the code of conduct it also says if anybody fights, they get suspended for a day.

Change

Near the end of the school year, Derrick began taking more initiative for learning in some classes. In my field notes for May 2, 1997, I wrote:

> I see Derrick's mom, who is talking with Ms. Howard. We greet each other, and she tells me that Johnson [Mr. Brown] is also here in the car. So I walk to the car and shake hands with him. He tells me that they just came back from Pennsylvania and are here to pick up Derrick. A few minutes later, Derrick comes downstairs, and sees that Johnson waits in the car. He asks, "Johnson, why you are here?" Mr. Brown ignites the engine, asking "Do you want me to leave?" Derrick quickly responds, "No, no." The three of them laugh, and it seems that they are very close and are having a good time. Ms. Lenard asks Derrick, "What did you do in Ms. Havery's class?" Puzzled by the question, Derrick hesitates for a moment, then says, "I passed the test; I'm doing better." She smiles, "I just want to see if you are telling the truth."

In her math section of the report card, Ms. Howard wrote:

> He [Derrick] has demonstrated within the last few months that he can do pre-algebra once he takes his education seriously. If he keeps up this positive attitude, he will do well next year.

During the last three weeks of May, 1997, a humanities teacher also noticed that there was upward movement in Derrick's performance: "He's been participating more, he's done some of his readings, and he actually did some of his homework." Several weeks later, she found that Derrick even called her at home one evening to seek her help on his homework assignment.

On the other hand, near the end of school year, there appeared to be downward movement for Derrick in his favorite science class. The science teacher commented in his section of Derrick's report card: "Your balloon-powered car was going in the right direction, but you 'gave-up' at the end. Your report needed more effort."

Derrick's advisor summed it up on the front page of his school year report card, based on teachers' comments in different subject areas:

> Derrick, you had a rough year. Your work in every academic class was inconsistent. . . . You need to think about your goals for next year. I also suggest you do some counseling as your emotional frustration and depression make it hard for you to focus in school.

Mr. Brown could understand why the school suggested Derrick seek counseling. On the other hand, he felt that:

> When the teachers look at this angry, frustrated child, they aren't aware of the fact that fifty percent of that is Derrick pushing it out there for them to see it so he can get away with what he's doing.

Thus, instead of counseling, what was needed was to "make him realize that he's doing this and he's not going to be allowed to get away with it anymore." Ms. Lenard agreed. "Derrick knows he's doing it; he realizes he is doing it. What he is gambling on is your buying it versus not." She felt that in dealing with these types of behavioral problems in African-American children, Caucasian teachers wanted African-American parents to deal with their children in the same way they [the teachers] would deal with their children, that is, send them to therapists and say, "You fix it."

During the middle of the school year, Mr. Brown and Ms. Lenard speculated about moving to New Jersey. One of the main considerations was to give Derrick a safer environment, where they could go to work without worrying about him being home alone and where Derrick could ride his bicycle without being hit by cars (he had been struck by cars twice in two years).

Derrick, too, realized that "it was time for a change," as he wrote in the school's literary magazine, published in February. Titled "Time for a Change," the text reflected his anxious desire and interest in having a new start in a new environment and to be accepted by his new imaginary peers:

> I hate being by myself! Maybe I should ask a girl out. Naaaa! She'll just say no. Or maybe go outside and play with other kids. Yeah! That's go outside and make friends. Naaaa! What if they don't like me, or want to play to with me? Well, I guess it's better to try than to be alone all the time.
>
> I leave my house. I lock my door. I walk downstairs to my porch. I leave my porch and go to the playground. I see another kid with a basketball. He looks about the same age as me. He's taller than me. He plays basketball good. I walk up to him and I say, "Hi, My name's Mathew. What's yours?" He stops playing for a minute. He turns around and he says, "You talking to me?" I said, "Yes. What's your name?" He said, "The name's Bob!" I said, "Hey, Bob is it real

fun around here?" Bob said, "Fun, fun, fun. Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, Matt, may I call you Matt?" I said, "Sure!" He said, "Man your looking at the town with the fun in Ohio! Man we have parks, playgrounds, and carnivals almost everyday!" I said, "Cool! I think my mom is calling me. But thanks man." He says, "No prob." I asked, "Are you coming outside tomorrow?" He replied, "I'm outside everyday." I said, "Alright, see you tomorrow."

I walked away and went home. This is the first friend I made in my new town. I was happy I moved to Ohio because I didn't like staying in the city, because it was violent. I used to live in the Bronx. I had a feeling Ohio would be different because kids were respectful and weren't doing anything bad. It was time for a change.

The Curry Household

Early in January, 1997, during a meeting arranged for parents of students with learning disabilities, Mrs. Curry sat very quietly. The only question she asked was what teachers looked for when they visited high schools, since she was concerned about the surroundings and safety of various high schools, specifically relating to drugs, gangs, and violence.

After the meeting, she sat there for forty minutes without saying anything. Then she asked her daughter's advisor why, if Sandra had such a good report card, couldn't she apply for a high school of her choice, adding in a soft voice: "This is crazy, this is crazy!" The advisor explained to her that Sandra was a nice girl, but high schools were going to look more at standardized reading and math scores than grades on report cards, adding "I wish we had more choices for her."

I was intrigued by Mrs. Curry's timing to initiate this exchange, the messages she conveyed, the way she conveyed them, and by the advisor's responses. First, it took Mrs. Curry two hours to speak; despite the relevance of her topic, she did not voice her concern about high school applications during the meeting. She waited forty minutes after the formal meeting had ended and most of the parents began to leave. Second, what she said was in contrast with the way she said it. Although she was very critical of the school's practices with report cards and high school selection, she made her comments in a very calm voice without showing any emotion. The advisor also responded calmly, took time to listen, and acknowledged what the mother said. She even suggested that she [the advisor] would let the director know that the school needed to do a better job to clarify the purposes of the report card. Thus, it seemed that both sides were in agreement about this emotionally charged issue. Both listened and saw the other's point of view. On the other hand, the exchange resulted in nothing that could improve Sandra's prospects for getting into

a suitable high school, since it was now January and high school applications depended largely on scores from standardized tests taken the previous spring.

Sandra was in the eighth grade. She lived in a two-bedroom apartment in a city housing project, where she shared a bedroom with her older sister; her mother, Mrs. Curry, shared another bedroom with Sandra's younger brother. Mr. Curry, separated from other members of the family for six years, lived alone in an apartment about thirty blocks away. Both Mr. and Mrs. Curry are of African-American descent. Because Mrs. Curry had been unemployed for several years, she had no choice but to settle in a housing project, a place she characterized as "a rough city":

> On my floor we got apartments that sell drugs. After a certain hour at night you can go downstairs and you'll see the little vials and stuff. You can see the guys hanging around downstairs.

For the first several years, Mrs. Curry would not let Sandra go downstairs alone. It was only about a year ago that she began allowing this. However, when I visited her apartment several months later, she had reversed her policy, explaining, "I won't let her go down by herself now because we have a rapist in the area...[who] seems to be hitting the projects." Mrs. Curry's fears were substantiated by a police notice hanging in the lobby of the building, which read: "Police Department: Wanted for robbery/rape. Wanted in connection with attack on women. Safety tips: 1-800-577-TIPS."

Sandra was interested in science, particularly the human body. During one of my visits, she said she was reading a book about the human body called *Tune in Health*, by Joseph P. Felice and Patrick J. Carolan, which discussed eating habits, fitness, the nature of disease, and the use and abuse of drugs. She had written several pages titled *Girl's Almanac—Things I Have to Know*, and she had drawn a picture of the female reproductive system. Among comments, she had noted: "PMS—was first diagnosed in 1931. A gynecologist named Dr. Robert Frank came up with 150 symptoms that women may experience that week before their periods."

Sandra was quiet, whether in the classroom or in the hallway. She found it easy to make friends at school, which was very important to her. The previous year, she and one of her best friends wrote a poem together that was printed in the school's literary magazine:

> Family is forever. . . . always
> Relationships are forever. . . . always
> Friends are always. . . . forever
> Love is forever. . . . Like the
> Sky and the moon. . . . forever and ever

Sandra felt that "the teachers are nice" and "the students are wild and crazy." Overall, she said that the classes were good, and she learned a lot from them. But

most of all, she liked her science classes. One science class was "fun" because she enjoyed designing a house just the way she would like it for herself, her boyfriend, and her children someday. She was very engaged in the task, right from the beginning, paying close attention to the teacher's explanation about how to design a floor plan. After class, the teacher commented that Sandra always worked very hard and he enjoyed having her in his class, although sometimes he found that she struggled with math concepts. This was one of the reasons he tried to use more hands-on activities in this class, which had eight students, including Sandra, who had been categorized as having learning disabilities.

In a science class on nutrition, a month and half later, the teacher explained the importance of planning meals with a balance of foods according to an acidic and alkaline model. She then distributed cooking recipes along with tables with information on which foods were acidic and which were alkaline. The students' task was to check five different recipes to see if they were balanced and, if they were not, to balance them. After copying down the recipes, Sandra quickly began to work. A moment later, as the teacher passed by her desk, Sandra asked, "What is lamb?" The teacher told her to look where the meats were listed. Several minutes later, as the teacher approached, Sandra asked the same question again:

> Sandra: Where is lamb?
>
> Teacher: Look at the meat [section].
>
> Sandra: Where is lamb?
>
> Teacher: Where do you see other meats listed?
>
> Sandra: It's acidic, I would think.

This episode suggested that it took time for Sandra to figure out the relationship between lamb and meat in this context, yet she showed interest, initiative, and persistence in searching for the right answer.

High School Applications, Report Cards, and Sandra's Learning Disability

During home visits following the meeting for parents of students with learning disabilities, Mrs. Curry said she had spoken with the director several times about Sandra's high school choices, and the director referred her to Sandra's advisor. Mrs. Curry made an appointment with the advisor; however, at the last moment, the advisor canceled the appointment. Instead, she wrote Mrs. Curry the following letter:

> I don't think we need to meet early tonight because in fact there are only a few schools that I would recommend for Sandra. I spoke with

> her again about this. She still wants to apply to Environmental and Jackie Onassis and Randolph. I wanted to communicate to both of you that with her low reading (6%) and math (30%) scores, these high schools will not accept her, even as a resource room student. However, it is possible to get accepted at these schools through the lottery system. If Sandra did get into to one of these schools, she would be expected to complete a difficult Regents curriculum. These schools have little flexibility in the way they present the curriculum and there is a lot of testing. Her low reading and math scores are basically "failing" scores and I am concerned that this indicates that she would fail her tests in these schools. I explained to Sandra that it is her choice and yours whether or not she chooses to try and pass in these schools. Only both of you know what kind of risks you are willing to take.

When the school was founded, the staff wanted its report card to provide more descriptive information in categories including attitude, effort, class participation, understanding of materials, and cooperative working skills. Each category was given a grade, which could range from honors, high pass, pass, low pass, and fail[5], along with narrative comments. In Sandra's case, almost all of her teachers liked her personality, attitude, and effort. One teacher wrote:

> Sandra, it was a real pleasure having you in class this semester. You are a motivated, driven, interested student. You constantly push yourself to understand. You are also respectful of and helpful to others. You are a good role model for your peers.

Because of these qualities, Sandra earned good marks. Out of the possible fifty-one marks from the six courses she took during the first semester of the 1996-97 school year, she received thirty-six honors, eight high passes, and seven passes.

Mrs. Curry was pleased with her daughter's report card, explaining:

> You look at a report card and the first thing is you want to see is if your child passes. When you see that your child is passing, then you look to see if she just getting by or if she's really on top of everything. So I'm looking, and I say, "Okay, she didn't fail anything." First she didn't fail anything. Then I check the low pass, she doesn't have any of that. She's getting passes, high passes, and honors. To me she's doing good.

[5]Honors—extra effort and consistent high quality work within students potential; high pass—consistent high quality work within students' potential; pass—adequate work according to student's potential; low pass—work needs improvement in order to meet student's potential; fail—inadequate work according to student's potential.

In light of these marks on Sandra's report card, what most puzzled and confused Mrs. Curry, her husband, and her daughter was the status of Sandra's learning disability. Sandra had been identified as a resource-room student in a small Catholic grade school, where she repeated a grade. When Sandra came to this middle school, Mrs. Curry said that the school did not discuss the issue of learning disability with her until the end of the seventh grade. She said she was "cool with that," even though she was not happy when the school told her:

> If you know that these kids have problems, then address these problems with the parents in the beginning. To wait almost two years later, come on, you cannot do that. Tell these parents up front, let them see what can be done, and tell how to go about doing it.

On the other hand, the school director wondered why Mrs. Curry did not realize, early on, that Sandra had a learning disability:

> Sandra came to the school identified as having LD, so we assumed that her mother knew. She was scheduled for the resource room, she had been through the testing before she came to the school, so I was very surprised that her mother didn't know about this.

Mr. Curry, however, had a difficult time believing that his daughter had any learning disability, right from the beginning:

> I never did see it. Even when she was at the Catholic school. I didn't see it then, and I don't see it now. So I don't understand what this is about. I don't see it. Like I said, if she had a learning disability, why was she getting good marks. . . . I ask you, would she have marks like this if she had a learning disability?. . . The bottom line is they picked the wrong kid. They picked the wrong kid to try to stick this tag on about having a learning disability.

Meanwhile, Sandra was "angry" when she was informed, near the end of seventh grade, that she had a learning disability. "I don't have no learning disability, I got pissed at that; I got very mad at the director because she said it to my mother." During interviews with Sandra and her parents, Sandra consistently claimed, "I have no learning disability," "I know how to read. . . . I'm really good in reading, I have no problem in reading." Yet, the director wondered, "How could she not realize this when she went off this floor to the third floor, worked with Ms. Williams for two years." Mrs. Curry felt that Sandra's denial was closely related to her father's denial. "He's kind of got Sandra a little brainwashed." The matter was made "worse because she's really starting to believe it, now it's like 'Maybe I was at first, but now I'm not.' But I know it doesn't happen like that."

Just as Sandra and her family were puzzled about her status of learning disability, it also confused them about the type of high school that Sandra would be able to get into. On October 28, 1996, Mrs. Curry received a letter from the school recommending three high schools for Sandra to consider. However, Mrs. Curry discovered that none were the kind of schools she was looking for. Her first concern was the location of the schools:

> They are all way out of the area for one [reason]. Class is going to start at 8:15. She's a girl, she'll have to leave here at 7:00 to get to class on time. That's fine in the summer, but the winter is another problem.

A related concern were the neighborhoods where these schools were located. She found that they were all located right in the middle of drug areas:

> I'm looking at other things besides what they're going to do in the classroom. I want to make sure that I'm not sending my child right into a drug city. Personally I think we know more about the set-up and what to look for, as far as a lot of drugs being in that area, than these teachers.

Another concern was that "every school that they selected was an alternative school," a school where there were no Regents exams, "no pressure," and "no requirements." Mrs. Curry asked, "Why send her there?":

> To me alternative high schools don't really seem to be that interesting. It's like they want to go, they go. . . . I have a couple of family members who went to alternative high schools, and its like they go today and don't go tomorrow and the rest of the week and nothing happens. You know, its like they [these school officials] think it's cute, and that she doesn't need. She needs some place where it says you have to come to school and you have to do this and that in order to pass.

Mrs. Curry's primary concern was that these high schools did not match Sandra's interests. Mrs. Curry feared, "If I don't get her into a school that does science, she's going to lose her interest, and I don't know if they [the teachers] realize that." Some of her fear came from her experience with her older daughter. Mrs. Curry wanted her older daughter to become a teacher and had sent her to a four-year college, which she [the daughter] did not like. She dropped out after three years. Initially, her daughter's withdrawal from college shocked her. She told her daughter, "How dare you? I have this debt and now you ain't going to finish college? Are you crazy?":

> She finally sat me down and said, "Ma, you got to understand. That's not what I want to be. Forcing me to do this is not working." So I said to myself, I'm not going to make that same mistake with Sandra.

Mrs. Curry wanted Sandra to go to a school where she would enjoy what she was doing, where she would learn, and where she would want to do her very best—instead of just going there to keep a seat warm while her mind wandered off somewhere else. If a school wasn't offering something that Sandra was interested in, Mrs. Curry reasoned, she would have to go to the school frequently. "There will be many a day that I'll be getting phone calls or I'll have to go over there to see where my child is."

Especially, Mrs. Curry felt that Sandra was entering a stage where "there's more peer pressure," a stage where "everybody might not be geared to doing right," and a stage where "she's not in full control of what she wants." She noticed that her own family members had dropped out because they didn't like the schools they were attending. She noticed that "a lot of parents start to lose their kids" to the neighborhood because the children lost interest in school and had nothing to do for six or seven hours during the day. They hang around in the street, "they either go sell drugs or get pregnant or join gangs or go on robberies." For Mrs. Curry, putting Sandra into a school she didn't like was "opening the door for her to be in trouble." Because the area where they now lived was not good, Sandra could have "a whole lot of time to get out there and get into trouble."

Thus, Mrs. Curry felt a sense of mission to find a school that would match her daughter's interest. She visited a dozen high schools and prepared a list of the names of nine schools, which she gave to Interconnections in early November. One of the main criteria was that "they have a good science program" and that "they will give her [Sandra] something to really be interested in." However, Mrs. Curry found out that "every one of the schools that I put down, they [teachers at the school] felt were too much for Sandra."

Mr. Curry did not agree with the view that the schools they selected would be too much for his daughter. He said, "I think by these marks she's entitled to go to any school that she wants." Sandra followed the same line of reasoning:

> My advisor says that the schools I want to go to are not going to take me because of my grades. There's nothing wrong with my grades, I've gotten 90's. That's good. I think my grades are good.

Mrs. Curry reacted differently. She wondered why teachers at Interconnections waited so long to "tell us what the deal is":

> With Black people, you've got to tell them point blank from day one what the deal is. . . . You're dealing with me for six months and the water is blue, and then tomorrow you decide it's green. You cannot do that with us. You cannot expect us to read between the lines. Our values are completely different. . . . We don't like sugar-coating it. If a child is failing, it might hurt her feelings, but tell that child, "Look, you're failing."

As a compromise, Mrs. Curry let the school add one of the high schools it recommended to the list, as a third choice, and move the rest of her choices down because it was a regular school, and "I didn't want Sandra to get caught [in a situation] where she's in no school."

The compromise didn't come easily for Sandra and her family. This middle school used to let parents fill out a child's application form. However, it found that often a single mistake, such as copying a wrong number, resulted in that child being rejected by a high school. As a result, the school decided to fill out all the high school applications itself.

Sandra's parents were very critical of this policy, although they were aware of the school's good intentions. They asked who gave the school "the authority" and "the right" to fill out their children's application? "These are our children we're talking about," and "we get offended when somebody else tries to have more authority over our children than us."

What was at stake, it seemed, was not just the physical process of filling out the application form, but also a sense of pride in doing it. As expressed by Mr. Curry: "I don't need them to fill out an application for my kid. I can do that myself." Likewise, Mrs. Curry, one of only a few of her siblings who had obtained a two-year college education while the rest of them never graduated from high school, wanted a sense of pride in filling out her daughter's high school applications. Instead, she felt that the family had been denied this opportunity.

Because of the influence of progressive education, the school emphasized trusting children and viewed education as a process the children should help construct for themselves. Therefore, the advisor felt that she had fulfilled her obligation relating to high school advisement by talking with Sandra—and not involving her parents. However, Mrs. Curry was disturbed with the school's approach of trying to persuade Sandra to choose the high schools that it wanted for her:

> I don't feel you have the right to think that I'm just going to change my mind because you discussed it with Sandra. It doesn't work like that. . . . If you can convince the child to go to the school you selected, that's between you and her. I'm still the mother, and if I say she's not going there, she's not going there.

Mrs. Curry felt the school's approach gave too much freedom to children:

> We've given our kids too much leeway, too much say on what they're going to do with their lives. It's fine when they become adults, but as kids they need to be treated as kids. . . [because] these kids will take anything, they'll go along with anything you say if it means less work. They want a free, easy time, I'm not hearing that.

This approach, in her view, was incongruent with what she tried to do as a parent:

> I sat down with her and looked into her mind about what she'd said she wanted to be. That's my job to look at the schools to see if they offer what she wanted, what she's interested in. Okay, she has input into that, but the final say of where she's going is mine.

Thus, she left with the impression that the staff had tried to avoid dealing with her and that they undermined her role as a parent:

> I sent in my list of schools where I wanted my child to go, and we scheduled appointments. But, every time we made an appointment, I got a different reason why it wasn't necessary to sit down and talk.

What was wrong with this approach, Mrs. Curry said, was that "I don't feel that they should feel that if we can convince the students—this is what we need to do, we ain't got to worry about the parents." Thus, she felt that the school had "overstepped" the line.

The family's reaction to this policy might have been less strong had there not been a misunderstanding over high school program codes. There were two coding systems used for high school applications—one for regular students and another for special education students. Mrs. Curry felt Sandra should be given a special education code if she had learning disabilities and needed special help. Yet the school placed regular codes on her applications. Mrs. Curry felt, "If you want to take that much responsibility, at least do it right."

> To me it's like she's just part of the furniture. . . . As far as I'm concerned with Sandra, I don't think they sat down and looked at her records when they selected these codes. I can't see how they can put her in a regular program when you're saying she has learning disabilities.

As it turned out, in New York resource-room students were not considered the same as special-education students. Nevertheless, the seemingly confused use of terms such as "special education," "learning disabilities," and "resource room," which the educational system imposed on both the school and the family, served to

deepen their misunderstanding. And, because of lack of communication between the family and the school, the misunderstanding persisted long after Sandra graduated from the middle school.

Beyond High School Applications

One of the teachers at Sandra's elementary school had recommended her present middle school to Mrs. Curry, saying that it was a good school that would accommodate Sandra's needs as a resource-room student. Now, after Sandra had been there for two and half years, Mrs. Curry felt that the school was "wonderful," aside from the high school incident:

> It's a good school, and they do take time to teach them. They get into programs that are hard to get into, like Bank Street. If you need extra help they have connections. . . . They do teach the kids, they do take them out, and they actually let them do some of the things they're learning about, instead of just reading about things.

Mrs. Curry especially valued the variety of educational trips organized by the school. She felt that it was nice that the school took all of the students for three days every year to a camp in upstate New York, which was also open for parents. She said, "It's really good for Sandra because she likes this outdoor life," adding, "and it was even an experience for me because I'd never been to a camp." She liked trips in which "they looked at different kinds of leaves, collected leaves, and brought them back and talked about them." She applauded the school's efforts to organize trips around "everybody's history and cultural events," including trips to an African burial ground and to Chinatown. "This is really good for them" because "it opens the doors for them, and it helps them to learn to get along with each other." Another aspect she liked about the school's organized trips was that "They're with kids their own age, and they're going to pay more attention to what they're seeing and ask more questions than when they're with their parents."

Most important to Mrs. Curry was that she felt that the approach of actually going outside and experiencing things matched the learning approach of the African-American children she had observed in her neighborhood:

> To me you can help Black children learn more, by taking them outside. If you want to teach them about safety, take them outside and actually go through safety principles. . . . That's how they learn. Our learning techniques are completely different. We learn more by actually doing it than reading about it or hearing about it. We have to do it to see it.

She also appreciated other learning opportunities at school:

> These kids get a chance to work on computers at school—that is really good, especially for folks like us. We don't own a computer, so if my kids didn't have the chance to work on the computer at school, that's not something they would get [an opportunity] to do right away.

Also, Mrs. Curry liked the small size of the school, which she felt prevented kids from getting lost. "It's small, so the kids can learn if they want to." She was particularly impressed by the school's personalized approach to her daughter, saying, "When you come into that school, they show genuine care. They're really interested in your child." She felt that her daughter was treated like "a human being" rather than "just a number" in the school.

"Being that she [Sandra] really likes the school, she likes what they do and everything," Mrs. Curry said she did not have to worry about her daughter dropping out of school. Clearly, she did not want her daughter to leave this school, lamenting "But I know it's going to end" because Sandra had to go on to high school. She valued the family aspect of the school. For example, in mid-April, Sandra suffered chest pains while at school. Mrs. Curry was unable to go to the hospital to be with her daughter because of a recent back operation. However, the school director, who was very concerned, went to the hospital and stayed in the emergency room with Sandra. "All that's good and you appreciate it," reflected Mrs. Curry.

The Prom Incident

One reservation Mrs. Curry had about the school was that the teachers "seem to focus more on what's going on at home than what a kid's doing at school":

> It's becoming like a family, and there's nothing wrong with that. But now I think they're losing perspective on what they're actually there for. Okay, they're there to learn, and to me that should be the main focus. But I think they're losing that. They get too involved in the whole life of the student that they're losing out on the main focus. . . . It's like a baker. His main thing is just to bake the cake, to put the ingredients in the cake. Now, instead of just doing the cake he wants to get into the frosting part. Okay, it's like instead of Interconnections just getting interested in a child's learning, they seem to be gearing more towards their home life and what they do after school or what the parents do. That's good up to a point. But, when it starts to stop them from being interested in what they're doing in school, then I think that they're going overboard.

Mrs. Curry particularly felt that the school went overboard about an incident that occurred the night before Sandra's prom. At one time, Evelyn had been

Sandra's best friend; however, their relationship changed when Sandra began dating Evelyn's former boyfriend. Although the boy was not a student at the school, it soon became common knowledge at school why the relationship between Sandra and Evelyn had "cooled." The night before the prom, the Curry family received three phone calls from the school staff—one from the director, one from Sandra's advisor, and one from Evelyn's advisor. All of them tried to dissuade Sandra from bringing the boy to the prom for fear of hurting Evelyn's feelings. Sandra's advisor, explained:

> This is one of those things in life. If you go out with the ex-boyfriend of your best friend, it's probably going to be trouble. . . . I was trying to help Sandra see that if she brought the boy, it was sort of like a slap in the face to Evelyn, because she still wants Evelyn to be her friend.

The school's efforts to persuade Sandra not to bring her date continued the next day. Immediately after math class and before Sandra left the room, Ms. Kenny and Sandra had a brief exchange at the front of the room. Judging from Sandra's facial expression and gestures, I sensed that she was upset. Later, at lunch time, when asked, Ms. Kenny remarked that once the school became aware of Sandra's intention of bringing the boy to the prom, several teachers had tried to discourage her, yet she insisted that she wanted to bring him. Ms. Kenny paused briefly, then added, "Sandra hasn't done anything wrong, so there's nothing the school can really do about it."

Mrs. Curry was disturbed by the school's excessive concern expressed over Sandra's prom date. She felt that this pressure was unfair to Sandra and that, in a way, it was unnecessary:

> It's cool that teachers can be more than teachers to students, if students have problems and they're comfortable enough to go to teachers and tell them their problems. . . . But little personal problems that every child has in mixing and going out with girls or boys. Every student does that sooner or later. That's not something you should make a big deal out of.

She also wondered, "Why would you try to make her feel that it's going to hurt Evelyn so badly if you bring this boy?" She recalled a birthday party that she, Sandra, the boy, and Evelyn had attended several months earlier, and she observed that "it didn't upset her [Evelyn] then. . . . There was no confrontation there." As a result, she couldn't understand how bringing the boy to the prom would be such a problem. She felt it's "not right" to "question her [daughter] constantly." Mrs. Curry felt it inappropriate to call the boy the night before the prom and ask him *not* to go the prom, since "Sandra had spoken with the boy a couple of months earlier

about the prom, and everything was set." In addition, she felt that the school had gotten more involved in Sandra's "personal life" than in her education: "It became like school was second to them, instead of being first." Also:

> I have never had them call me on the phone or call Sandra on the phone and say, "Well, Mrs. Curry, Sandra's grades are not what they could be. You know she needs extra help, say, in English or science." I have never had that kind of phone call, but I have had these phone calls on her situation with the boy and Evelyn. . . . I got more feedback from them concerning this prom than I did about high schools, and I'm very mad about it. I was like, I don't understand how they work.

The prom, held the following night, seemed to go peacefully, at least on the surface. Sandra and Evelyn kept a respectful distance. In my field notes, I wrote:

> Sandra and Johnny arrive after 7:30 p.m. She and Ellen, her best friend here at the school, greet each other. Sandra quickly introduces the boy to her. Sandra has a very good time throughout the prom, dances frequently, and displays a happy face. On the other hand, Evelyn seems to enjoy the prom less, dancing less often, and looking around. There is no confrontation between the two of them, however, they simply avoid contact.

Later, when reflecting on the school's approach to Sandra's choice for a prom date, the school director reasonably felt "that it was certainly overkill. . . that got out of hand." She also observed that "it worked out all right at the prom." On the other hand, she wondered if "maybe if so much attention had not been paid to it, it *could* have been really difficult at the prom."

Homework

While Mrs. Curry witnessed the school's excessive concern over her daughter's prom date, she felt that it had not paid enough attention to Sandra's homework and academic progress. For Mrs. Curry, the main purpose of doing homework was that "it reinforces what they learned earlier that day." In addition, "it gives them a chance to think and explore stuff." Beyond these two purposes, "it also keeps them from bugging me while they're home," which she regarded as a benefit as a parent. For her, the last, and perhaps most important, purpose for doing homework was that it keeps children away from trouble. "If they're doing what they're supposed to be doing, it will keep them occupied, it will give them less time to be wanting to hang out in the streets." Accordingly, she felt that the school did not assign enough

homework for her daughter. "She can sit and do all her homework within half an hour, and she's finished. And some days she ain't have none at all." She was concerned about this because "down here [in this neighborhood], there's really nothing to do. So if you don't keep them busy, they'll be in trouble."

In addition, Mrs. Curry was concerned about the homework practices of some teachers. She found that these teachers just wanted to see if a homework assignment was done, not if it's done correctly:

> I've seen papers that she wrote and then went to the computer and did it. And I'm like [flabbergasted]. The teacher couldn't possibly read this because there are misspelled words and sentences that just don't make any sense at all. I can't see how a teacher can allow you to leave it like that without telling you to do it differently.

She had reservations about such a practice because "if you let children write something to you, and it doesn't any sense, and you don't correct it, then they think it's okay. And they'll continue doing that." She found that this practice also made it difficult for her, as a parent, to help her child because if "the teacher doesn't correct it, and if I see it I correct it, and she has to do it over, and it's like 'You're just picking on me.'" She felt strongly that "the teacher should not accept it, she should at least give her some kind of knowledge to know, 'this does not make sense.'" Adding to this frustration was Mrs. Curry's concern over the standards of the Richard Green High School, which Sandra was going to attend. She anticipated that "September is going to be a *hard* time for her":

> If she goes to Richard Green, I know she's going to have some problems in English. . . because I've read over the requirements. They tell you to proofread, correct spelling, and grammar. She doesn't do that. She just writes down what's in her head.

Discussion and Conclusion

The school used three interrelated approaches to bring home and school together: building a school community, attending to students' emerging personal and social needs, and emphasizing learning by experiencing. It had become an extended family by respecting and taking a genuine interest in students, by helping everyone learn to get along, and by creating a variety of learning opportunities that resembled and built upon students' home experiences. Students felt the school became a place where they could gain a level of acceptance and a sense of comfort and intimacy, a place they could turn to when they needed help. Three teenagers from the four families studied explicitly mentioned that they liked the amount of freedom they had, ranging from allowing students to leave the school for their daily lunch to the staff not always "watching them behind their backs." Two boys (Greg and Derrick) mentioned specific classes they liked, especially playing basketball in gym classes, but the most appealing aspects to the two girls (Allison and Sandra) were the social climate of the school and their sense of connection with the staff and other students.

The parents, unlike the children, came to the school with other agendas in mind. These case studies reveal that all of the parents from the four families sent their children to this specific school purposefully. Three of the families were referred by elementary school teachers; the parent in the fourth family visited over a dozen schools before she decided to send her child to this school. The school's small enrollment and its proximity to home were the main reasons shared by two of the families. Furthermore, the parents from all four families had unique agendas in mind. Mrs. Lynch finally decided to send Greg to the school after being told that some graduates had been accepted by highly selective high schools. Mrs. Curry enrolled her daughter, convinced that the school would help her as a student with learning disabilities. Ms. Lenard—the only parent who did not reside within walking distance of the school—justified her decision because of the ethnic diversity of the student body and its effort to help students interact and get along.

Despite these varying agendas, all of the four families found that the school specifically emphasized student life, seeking to build a tight-knit community where students were encouraged to "be together and be there for each other." The parents were very appreciative of this initiative. Some parents said that they were particularly impressed with the commitment and devotion of the director and other

staff members. For example, Mr. Brown pointed out that this was not a typical junior high school where the principal only knew your child's name because the child's file happened to be there on his (or her) desk. Mr. Brown found that the amount of interest, effort, and energy that the staff showed Derrick was extremely positive. Other parents liked the school's personalized approach of getting to know and being intertwined with students and their families. Ms. Lenard applauded the school's family atmosphere and the resulting nurturing and homey feeling. Reflecting on Sandra's illness at school, Mrs. Perry said she was grateful that staff members showed such genuine care for the needs of her child. Sandra was treated not just as "a number," but as "a human being."

Perhaps opening its doors and embracing families from diverse backgrounds and with different agendas presented the school with potential challenges in how to serve each of these families well and to live up to their expectations. It appeared that one challenge did manifest itself in the area of parent expectation related to academic learning.

Some of the parents from the four families felt that the school's attention to academics was inadequate, while other parents felt it was balanced. For example, Mrs. Perry did not think that the attention given to meeting the student's social and emotional needs compromised its academic rigors. She observed the school's focus on academics, whether it was the way teachers taught their classes, their expectations of students, or the type of homework they assigned. Mrs. Curry liked the broad variety of learning opportunities offered by the school. Especially, she cheered the approach of taking students outside the school to learn from experiencing other settings, which was similar to what she observed as a common approach to learning used in her neighborhood.

On the other hand, a feeling prevailed among most of the parents that the school paid more attention to social and personal concerns than to academic matters. This issue appeared most evident in Sandra's case. For Mrs. Curry, the priority was how Sandra was doing at school—her high school applications, her report card, and her status as a student with a learning disability—not her personal life. She believed that more detailed feedback from the school would have helped Sandra learn better, increasing her chances of being accepted at the high school of their choice. Thus, she could not understand why the school paid much more attention to Sandra's prom date than to her high school application.

Similarly, Mr. Brown was concerned that the teachers did not closely monitor Derrick's academic progress, failing to provide timely feedback on what he needed to improve, especially in basic skills. Mrs. Lynch wondered whether academics might have been sidetracked with so much emphasis given to building "a nice, chummy community." Judging from all the conversations she had with school personnel, she had yet to hear a conversation on how to bolster academics. Even Mrs. Perry, who thought the school did focus on academics, worried about the

school's afternoon schedule, because she felt that most of these classes were not about "academic affairs."

It seems that we could find explanations for these families' concerns about the academic process by treating them generically, without considering them within the context of their experiences. We can even find justifications for doing so by applying their own reasoning. In addition to relatively less attention given to academics, as some of these families contended, another reason was that they felt that efforts invested in the social/emotional area were *undermining* academic progress. Mrs. Curry felt that as the school tried to understand and accommodate its students' needs for identity, comfort, and belonging, it changed the nature of the relationship between teachers and students. As teachers became more like friends to students, it became increasingly more difficult for teachers to consistently place academic demands on the students. Mr. Brown pointed out the same perceived undermining dynamics from a different angle. By spending so much time and energy knowing the children personally, he wondered whether the school had much time or energy left to use this knowledge as a leverage to promote academics.

In the discussion that follows, I go beyond this level of analysis by focusing on how these families' concerns about academics were shaped by who they are, where they came from, and what their expectations were for their children.

The Role of the School

One of the factors that mediated these parents' concerns about academics were their expected goals for the school. While Mr. Brown held a balanced view that academics were the other half of the package, and they were just as important as building a nurturing school community, parents from the other three families believed that the school should focus primarily and decidedly on academics. Mrs. Curry explained: "Some situations do require teachers to get more involved in children's personal lives, but that should not be their main focus. . . . That's for the parents." Teachers should be teachers, more geared to school work. Mrs. Lynch strongly believed that "academics should be in the forefront, not in the background," because high schools were going to look at math and reading scores more than anything else.

The school viewed its role differently. For the school, the importance of getting involved in children's personal lives extended well beyond "some situations." In fact, it became a focal point, a precondition. As the director argued, if the school did not deal with the whole child at this age, students were not able to learn. Also, part of the school curriculum was about how to learn to get along with each other. Consequently, a high priority was to create a sense of community among the children, not just as students but as people, which was considered not only a learning

experience in and of itself, but it was also considered necessary to make other types of learning possible. It may be argued whether Mrs. Curry raised a valid point when she stated that it would not "hurt the school to pick up the phone" and let her know that Sandra had a problem in math or reading and offer her suggestions on ways she could help her daughter. Mrs. Curry rarely received individualized feedback about her daughter's work in specific subject areas in the resource room, but she received immediate and intensive feedback about the choice of her daughter's prom date, which appeared to suggest something about the school's priority. On the other hand, the issue was more complicated than first appeared, as explained by a student-intern who was present at a meeting in early January, 1997:

> Our priority looks to be a different place. Is it true that our priority is in a different place? I wouldn't say that. I would say that in a situation there had been a go-round about high schools, and it had been going back and forth about the high schools. And frustration maybe on someone's part in terms of: "You know, there's no other choice." It's the reality of the system out there. We can't control that.
>
> Then something comes up into our faces where there's going to be a real problem at the prom in terms of behavior. So we have to deal with that. I wouldn't say that the priority was the social being more important than academic. I would say that the priority was what was in our face and what was going to happen right then, was the priority over the long term. It's more manageable to get that done and they could get that done.

The Role of Parents

Closely related to the differing views about the role of the school, the school and the parents also held differing views about the parents' role in their children's education. It appeared that the parents from all four families wanted to have more input into their children's education than the school wanted, although both sides shared the same good intentions. For example, although Sandra's advisor thought there was no need for her to meet with Mrs. Curry before the parents meeting, she [the advisor] noted that she had spoken with Sandra about her high school application. After the meeting, the advisor again took the initiative and talked with Sandra about her choices for high school. Similarly, during the intense communication regarding Sandra's choice of prom date, the person the school wanted to talk to was Sandra, not Mrs. Curry. Mrs. Curry became involved only because Sandra was not at home initially; later, she became intrigued by the intensity and content of the phone calls to Sandra. On the other hand, as a parent, Mrs. Curry felt that she should have a final say in the high school Sandra might be attending. In fact, she was deeply disturbed

by what she perceived as the school's attitude toward her as a parent, that is, "we're not going to worry about you if we could just work it out with your daughter."

The perceived difference regarding the appropriate role of parents was also evident in Derrick's case. For example, during a teacher/parent/child conference, the school director repeatedly asked Ms. Lenard to "back off" because she [the director] wanted Derrick to take full responsibility for writing his contract. Mrs. Lenard agreed that Derrick's education was his responsibility, but she felt that, as a mother, she also needed to be involved in tracking Derrick's progress, especially with his inclination to find every excuse possible for not doing his work. In Greg's case, in response to Mrs. Lynch's inquiry about how to help her son obtain extra work from his teachers, the advisor wanted her to "back off" by implying that Greg was the one who should take this initiative, not her as a parent.

These divergent views about the role of parents and children resulted from different perceptions of the degree of trust and freedom each side thought would be appropriate to allocate to adolescents. Influenced by progressive education, the school emphasized trusting children and viewed education as a process that children construct for themselves. On the other hand, these parents viewed it quite differently. Whereas parents in two families explicitly stated that they liked the trust and freedom the school gave to their adolescents, all of the parents from the four families wondered if it gave too much freedom to them, if they were capable of dealing with these autonomies. For example, Mrs. Curry believed that these adolescents would go along with anything if it meant less work. Thus, she strongly believed that "as kids, they need to be treated as kids." Mrs. Perry went so far as to say that the reason many children are "lost" in this country today is because they have too much freedom.

Racial Consciousness

These families' views of the role of the school, the parent, and the child were further mediated by their racial consciousness as well as the gender of their children and their own economic status. These case studies revealed that all parents from all four families were keenly aware of who they were, especially their own racial and ethnic identities. Partially, it had to do with their experience and status as members of a minority in this country. For example, Mr. Lynch's comment on the importance of education was obviously from this perspective. He firmly believed that "the only way minorities are going to make in it in this country is to be educated," because both he and his wife were "brought up that way." Mrs. Perry's commitment to help Allison "become someone with a future" by structuring the family's free time at home was undoubtedly shaped by her beliefs about what was best for Allison, resulting from her own experience growing up in Ecuador and as a first-generation immigrant to the United States. Her awareness of family racial identities, along with the desire to teach her son how to get along in life with people from different races,

prompted Ms. Lenard to send Derrick to a middle school that enrolled students from diverse ethnic backgrounds.

Racial consciousness may also be related to the fact that their children were in a school where the staff was predominately Caucasian, even though Caucasian students represented only eleven percent of the student body. Even when Mrs. Curry applauded the school's approach of encouraging students to experience some of the things they were learning about, her racial consciousness was clearly evident. For example, "To me you can help Black children more by taking them outside." "We learn more by actually doing it than to just read about it or hear about it." Her racial consciousness also was evident in the misunderstandings that arose over the differing roles expected of the school, the parent, and the child; over discrepancies between report cards and standardized tests; and over the new policy of filling out high school applications. For example, "With Black people, you've got to tell them point blank from day one what the deal is." "We get offended when somebody else is trying to have more authority over our child than us." "How could they just assume that they can take that responsibility and fill out the application for us?" "I just don't understand how they feel that they know our kids better."

Mr. Lynch's reaction to the "Cops and Kids" program clearly illustrates how his judgment was influenced by his racial consciousness. Mr. Lynch strongly opposed his son's participation in the program on the grounds that Greg is an African-American teenager. For example, "The police treated African Americans differently." "Black children cannot go up to the police and say, 'Mr. Officer?'" As a teenager, Greg looked more Chinese than African American, although in this situation (e.g., running into a police officer in the street), what counted more than anything else was what Greg looked like, not what Mr. Lynch thinks he is.

In another situation, Ms. Lenard and Mr. Brown were deeply concerned about Derrick's encounter with a Latino boy over name-calling. The school did nothing to prevent this from escalating into a fight—why? How important is it for the school to make time for a dialogue on racial acceptance among staff, students, and parents. For example, "With all that's going on in the world and all that's going in our communities, this takes just as much precedence as getting algebra right?" They also wondered whether the staff knew that, as an African-American teenager, Derrick was often seeing if he could get away with his lax behavior.

In the Perry family, perhaps because Mrs. Perry belonged in the category of voluntary minorities (Ogbu and Simons, 1998) and, as an adult, immigrated to the United States seeking educational opportunity in a new land, her sense of racial or ethnic consciousness differed somewhat from the other families. She was more concerned about how to fit in this country and how to get a better education for Allison and her sister, for example, by exerting strong control over the children's free time in the evening. Nevertheless, her desire did not prevent her racial or ethnic consciousness from emerging. This is illustrated by her not wanting to be assimilated

unconditionally. Instead, she wanted her daughters to value and keep "our roots." Even though she wanted to fit in, she also wanted the school to reach out to Latino parents, like herself, who held different assumptions about the role and rights of parents in their children's education. She wanted the school to provide a Spanish translator for parent association meetings for those parents who had difficulty understanding English.

Parents' racial consciousness lent weight and emotion to the existing concerns resulting from different views about the role of the school, the parents, and the children. For example, in responding to advice on his report card that Derrick seek counseling for his emotional frustration and depression, Ms. Lenard wondered whether the advisor did not understand that Derrick was probably acting up as a typical African-American boy. She was puzzled why Caucasian teachers wanted African-American parents to deal with this behavior in *their* way. Ms. Lenard's racial consciousness served to distance herself from the school and, accordingly, from the approach suggested by the school. Similarly, in criticizing the school's approach to handling her daughter's report card, Mrs. Curry injected her own racial consciousness (e.g., "Black people," "they," and "our kids"). By explicitly connecting the issues raised by this approach to the racial group she identified with, Mrs. Curry was making value judgments not only about the approach itself, but also from someone else's viewpoint. Because these families focused on the point that they were from a different racial group and were displeased with the approaches used by another racial group, these assumptions added to their displeasure. They doubted the approach themselves and those who used the approach.

Gender and Class

Closely related to their racial consciousness, these case studies show that the parents from all four families were concerned about their children as teenagers, both in the school and in their own neighborhoods. Thus, in a sense, the issues of race, gender, and class became intertwined, contributing to the existing differences over the role of school, parents, and children.

First, although all of the parents from the four families were concerned about their adolescents' safety in urban settings, it seemed that the concerns of parents with teenage girls differed from the concerns of parents with teenage boys. The parents of teenage girls were less influenced by their children's racial identity. As parents of teenage boys, Mr. Lynch and Ms. Lenard were mainly afraid of potential police brutality on the streets, related to their perceived identity as African-American teenagers. On the other hand, Mrs. Perry and Mrs. Curry were more concerned about the safety of their daughters in school and in the neighborhood, simply as adolescent girls of whatever race.

Second, the degree and intensity of these differences about safety between teenage boys and girls were further mediated by the neighborhood where a family could afford to live. Although both Mr. Lynch and Ms. Lenard were concerned about the police brutality their sons might encounter, it concerned Ms. Lenard more because she and Derrick had actually witnessed or heard about similar incidents in communities where they had previously lived. Mr. Lynch's concern was derived mainly from historical and legal facts that indicated that police tended to treat African Americans differently. Similarly, while both Mrs. Perry and Mrs. Curry were concerned about the safety of their teenage girls, this was more of an issue for Mrs. Curry because of her economic status and the physical threats associated with living in a ghetto. Because she had been unemployed for several years, she had to settle in a housing project where drug activities and violence, such as rape, were rampant. As a result, her main daily concern was the safety of her two daughters (e.g., "I'm scared, I really don't want nothing to happen to them").

Mrs. Curry's concern over Sandra's well-being, which transcended everything else she wanted for her, played out in interchanges with the school staff. For example, a major reason she wanted teachers to assign more homework was that, she reasoned, more time needed to do homework would leave less time for her daughter to hang out on the streets, thus less probability of getting into trouble. During the meeting for parents of children with learning disabilities in early January, 1997, the only question Mrs. Curry asked was whether teachers checked out the surroundings and the safety of the high schools they visited. When she noticed that three high schools recommended by the school required Sandra to pass through drug areas on her way to and from school, she was deeply concerned. "That's like telling her to go and get into trouble." She wondered about the teachers' priorities and judgment (e.g., "What are they looking at when they check these schools?"). She didn't think that teachers were trying to willfully place Sandra in drug-infested areas. Still, she felt that the teachers were not members of "we"—race-wise and class-wise—and knew little about the dangers of walking through drug-infested areas and would feel little sense of urgency to try to avoid them. As a result, the issue of checking the high-school neighborhoods further alienated her from the school and became another area that made her wonder why the school took away "the privilege" of filling out the high-school application from her, as a parent, if the teachers were unable to address its implication on her daughter.

We have just discussed how the intense concern about the safety of early adolescents was mediated by the families' economic class, intertwined with their racial and gender consciousness. In addition, these case studies indicated that perhaps related to economic class another somewhat different variable that shaped the families' views of the school's approaches was their social class, as indicated by their general knowledge and understanding of their children's educational system. Such influence was especially manifested in their perception of the role of the school and their own role as parents.

Three families (the Perrys, the Lynchs, and the Lenards) were very much aware of the middle school their children attended and the larger context of the urban educational system. As parents, this awareness led them to be proactive toward their children's education. For example, Mrs. Lynch was aware of the importance of the citywide standardized tests on Greg's high school application. Although her son had attended the school for only three months in sixth grade, she was eager to find out what she, as a parent, could do to help prepare him for the tests.

Similarly, Mrs. Perry was also proactive toward her daughter's education, based on her understanding of the educational system: the number of schools she could choose in New York City for middle and high school for her daughter, what she wanted for her daughter, and what the middle school could offer her daughter. She did so by looking for a middle school for Allison when she was still in the third grade and by structuring constructive activities, with a particular emphasis on academics, for her daughter during the evening.

The Curry family, on the other hand, seemed to be less aware of the emphasis of this middle school within the context of the city educational system. This lack of awareness led the family to be less proactive about Sandra's education in her three years at this middle school and more reliant on the school to take care of everything for Sandra. This was most evident in the family's initial response for almost two and a half years toward her report card, followed by subsequent shock over what it meant for her high school application.

To summarize, this monograph examines how the school's strategies and approaches were perceived by the students and their families from diverse backgrounds. The data indicate that the students perceived the school's initiatives more favorably and more in line with its intended purposes than did their families. Unlike their children, the families shared a heightened concern about academics. These concerns were shaped by their expectations relating to the roles of the school, the parent, and the child, further mediated by their racial consciousness and intertwined with gender and class.

The data point to the prominent role that racial consciousness plays in shaping families' interpretations of school practice, especially in the face of divergent viewpoints and resulting differences. These findings support Gay's (1998) stressing the central importance of paying attention to the issue of race in educating minority children. In addition, the data illustrate the importance of investigating the complex interactions of race, class, and gender (Banks, 1993) and how these intertwined variables shaped the families' interpretations. It also reveals that we face an immeasurably confounding task as we attempt to communicate across racial, cultural, and social lines, or lines of unequal power (Delpit, 1995).

This present study suggests that a school cannot separate itself from the perceptions and experiences of the families it seeks to engage. Instead, the school needs to move beyond its assumptions, to hear families' interpretations of and reactions to its initiatives and *on an ongoing basis*, no matter how good the embedded intentions.

This study further suggests some of the potential challenges a school can face in its effort to reach out to families from diverse backgrounds, probably more so than reaching out to students. This is a research hypothesis that warrants further investigation.

In their recent work on voluntary and involuntary minorities, Ogbu and Simons (1998) state that for involuntary minorities "much of the mistrust of schools comes from the community and students' parents" (p. 182). The data from this present study seem to support this statement, whether it is about Mr. Lynch's decision to take Greg out of the "Cops and Kids" program or about Mrs. Curry's displeasure with the school's decision to take care of Sandra's school applications without communicating with her. Obgu and Simons further state that "the community and parents play a substantial if not controlling role in producing the mistrust that students bring to school" (1998, p. 182). This current study did not observe that these families reproduced mistrust in the minds of their children. This was perhaps due, in large measure, to the school's impressive effort to connect with its students rather than the validity of the statement made by Obgu and Simons.

Families' attitudes toward school can be shaped by their children's attitudes toward their school. This study confirms that belief. Yet it also reveals that the children's predominately positive attitudes toward the school still *did not prevent* their parents' mistrust from emerging. This observation only adds to the argument to support the hypothesis that a school faces more challenges in its effort to reach out to families from diverse backgrounds than to their children.

For efforts to reach out to families from diverse backgrounds to be more meaningful and purposeful, we need to have a better understanding about how these families perceive and interpret these efforts and of how their perceptions and interpretations can be shaped by their experiences. More studies are needed in this area to expand our knowledge of culturally relevant approaches for reaching out to families, paralleling culturally relevant pedagogy for students, to better address the needs of educating an increasingly diverse body of students and their families in the next century.

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